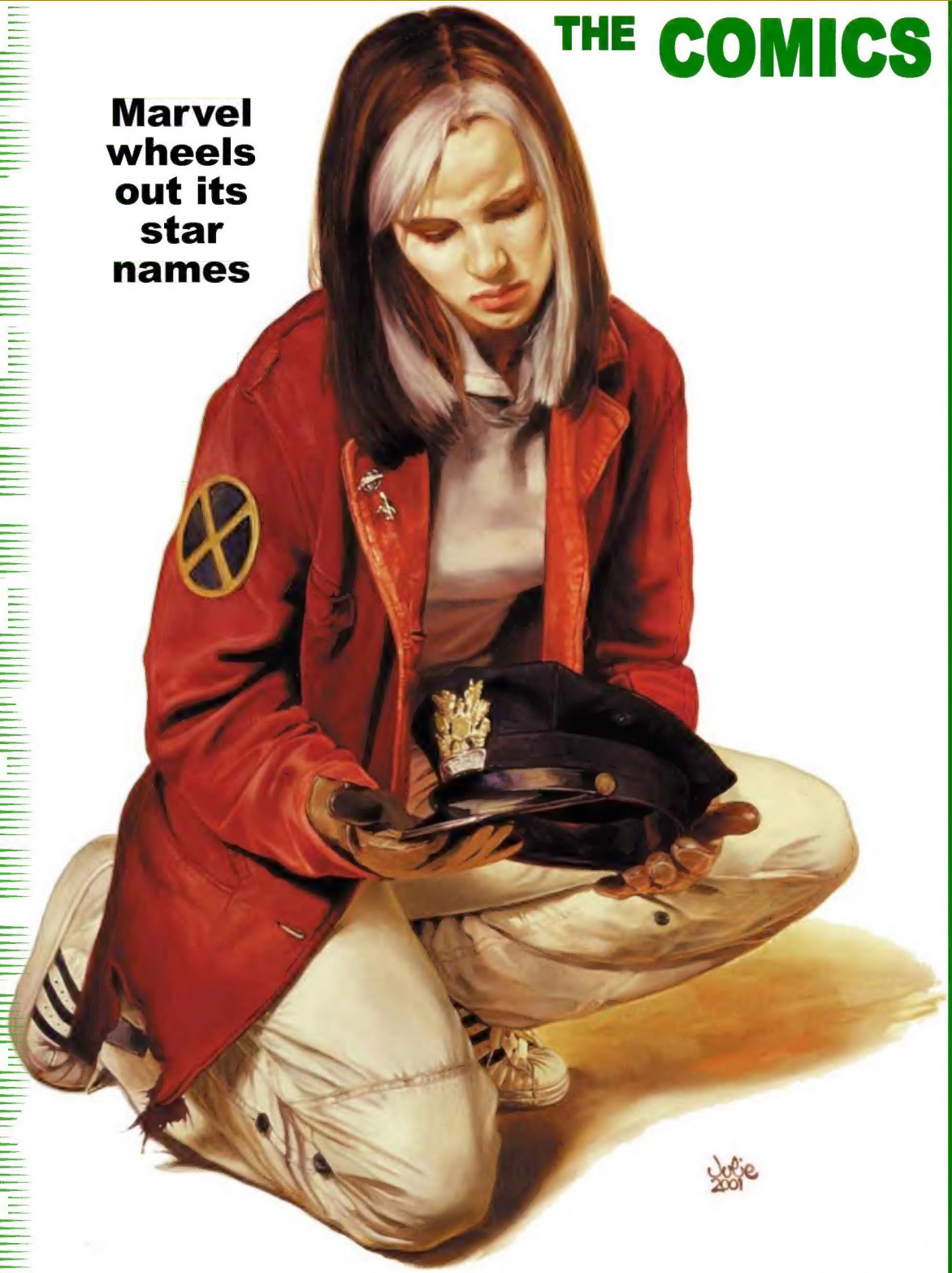
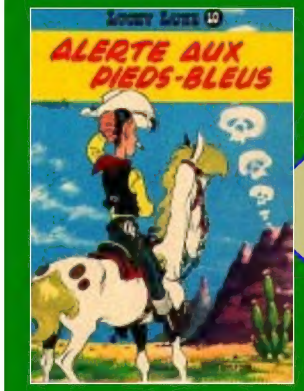
BORDERLINE

THE COMICS MAGAZINE

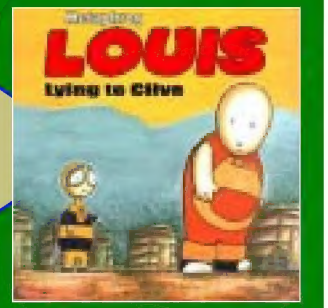


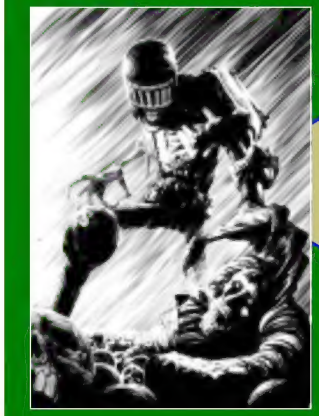
Marvel wheels out its star names



A comics legend honoured

Louis and Clive exposed





Frazer Irving unmasked

Bryan Talbot In-depth

BORDERLINE

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http://borderline.mediahall.co.uk

LINE OF FIRE

HAVE you ever wondered why we do it? You know, still read comicbooks? Especially when there're so many other things going on out there to fill up our time.

More pertinent is why people like us do things like this? Dedicate vast tracts of time and effort, for free, to produce what a former employer of mine would call "a vanity project"... Good looking vanity project, isn't it?

So why start something new? It's a small industry, it might well be oversubscribed already and there's all that competition... This might sound altruistic, but aren't we all doing this for one reason anyhow? Isn't that to promote the hobby we all love?

We're doing this because it's what we're all doing anyway. Whether it's via an Internet discussion group, letters, fanzines, emails, Usenet, webzines, pub meets, comic marts and conventions or just talking to a guy in your local comic shop. We all try to make people accept our medium as something more than a derided trainspotter's thing. We're doing this because we think we know how to do it right. In a way that people will be able to appreciate whether they are comic fans or not.

Borderline grew out of a number of ideas, the success I'd had with my Yahoogroup, the growing feeling at this year's UK comics convention that the time was right to do something proactive and the buzz I've been experiencing for weeks – that fandom still exists!

As this project started to come together, it became obvious that we were trying to do something different and innovative. And as people, important people within the industry, started to hear about Borderline, the reaction was phenomenal! There might be those who will download this and say we're doing nothing different, but I think we are.

Our goal is to cover as many facets of this industry as possible – globally. One of my team commented that he used to buy comics magazines for the superhero fodder and thanks to magazines like Speakeasy and The Comics Journal was introduced to a new world, one he wasn't aware of. That's the aim of Borderline and, personally, I'm hoping you feel that we achieve that...

...Phil Hall, July 2001

Dedicated to Lily Payne (1989-2001) - an inspirationalist!

DEATH OF A HERO

*One of the most important comics creators of all time has gone... **Mike Kidson** says Hasta la vista Lucky Luke*

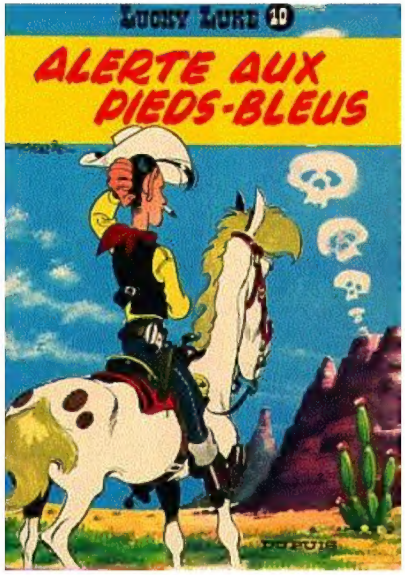
THE creator of the world's most famous comics cowboy has taken his last ride into the sunset. Maurice De Bévère, author of **Lucky Luke**, died at his home in Brussels on Monday July 16th, as a result of a pulmonary embolism. He was aged seventy-seven.

Morris – the nom de plume by which he was known to millions of readers worldwide – was born in Courtrai, Belgium, on December 1st 1923. He commenced his career as an artist in 1944, working first as an inker at the Belgian animation studio CBA, then as a cartoonist for the magazine le Moustique and the daily newspaper Het Laatste Nieuws.

By 1946, he had formed a close association with three other young Belgian cartoonists, Franquin, Will and Jijé, and in that year he produced the first **Lucky Luke** story, *Arizona 1880*, for l'Almanach Spirou.

In 1948, he moved to New York, where he became acquainted with the EC Comics creators Jack Davis and Harvey Kurtzman and with fellow expatriate René Goscinny, the future author of both **Lucky Luke** and **Asterix**. Morris and Goscinny worked closely with Kurtzman and Davis in preparing Kurtzman's new parody comic, **Mad**, which debuted in autumn 1952.

On returning to Europe in 1955, he renewed his association with



Goscinny and for the next twenty-two years the pair produced approximately one new **Lucky Luke** story every 6 months, first for the weekly comic **Spirou** then, after 1968, for the magazine **Pilote**.

After Goscinny's death in 1977, he continue to produce **Lucky Luke** stories at the same rate, working with a number of scripters and increasingly with the aid of assistants. In 1990 he parted company with his longtime publisher Dargaud and established his own company, Lucky Productions, through which all his new albums and reprints subsequently appeared.

By 1995, **Lucky Luke** was ranked as one of the most popular comics series of all time, second only to Hergé's **The Adventures of Tintin**. Total sales of the albums worldwide were numbered in the millions; 3 action films and 2 series of animations based on the character had been produced. At the time of his death, Morris was supervising a new third series of animations, which is expected to debut on French television next season.

The extraordinary appeal of **Lucky Luke** is hard to analyze but may perhaps be ascribed to the combination of Morris's vivid, deceptively relaxed cartooning and his attention to the detail of the mythology of the Wild West with a warmly humorous approach. Luke is firmly cast in the mould of the solitary, rootless cowboy hero, riding off at the end of every story astride his faithful steed Jolly Jumper, singing "I'm a poor lonesome cowboy and a long way from home", and the ironic self awareness implied in that song may convey some idea of the depth of the character. Neither a secretive Lone Ranger nor a dour spaghetti western hero, Luke is cheerful and resourceful, a cowboy who may forever remain lonesome, but whom everyone would be happy to call their friend. Perhaps it is that last quality which endeared him to the hearts of so many readers.

There have been few translations of **Lucky Luke** into English, but 7 albums are currently available from the UK publisher Glo'Worm Productions.

Sadly, Morris will be a name that few American comic readers will identify with clearly.

The end of UK girls' comics?

THE last of the British comics for girls, **Bunty**, is no longer to be published. The weekly, launched in January 1958, was cancelled by its Dundee-based publisher, D.C. Thomson at issue 2249 in February and replaced by **Cool Magazine**, a features title, and a reprint comic, **Bunty Monthly**. That in turn has been cancelled after 5 issues.

In its early years **Bunty** revolutionized a genre that had been dominated by middle class values, offering tales of comprehensive schools and working girls instead. It soon became the market leader, influencing subsequent titles and remaining popular enough to survive the cull of girls' comics in the late 1980s and soldier on alone into the 21st century.

But low sales have finally ended its run. Thomson's circulation manager, John Fullerton, told **Borderline** via email: "As a weekly, **Bunty** had a long life – over 40 years – but reading habits change and girls have changed. The publication suffered from these changes and not enough people bought it to keep it viable." He added: "We were sorry to see it go, but **Cool Magazine**, which replaced it, seems to be what girls want to read today."

Marvel expands .comics

MARVEL has expanded its dotComics programme to offer fans four complete issues of Marvel comics every month at www.marvel.com/dotcomics.

The company seems to be succeeding in its efforts to bring Marvel to new readers, as dotComics have attracted more than a million hits over the last four months. Senior Developer John D. Roberts said: "Currently, **Ultimate Spider-Man**, **Ultimate X-Men**, and **Amazing Spider-Man** are offered every month. We've recently added a rotating fourth. These have included **Fantastic Four** #40, **Uncanny X-Men** #390, and **Spider-Girl** #33. In anticipation of Elektra's new series, **Daredevil** #168, containing her first appearance, will be available soon. Also, since Alan Davis's run on Avengers has been generating such great response, his and Kurt Busiek's issues will be translated into Marvel dotComics."

Bill Rosemann added: "The Ultimate titles were created for new readers, so they were a natural choice as Marvel dotComics. Likewise, J. Michael Straczynski's run on **Amazing Spider-Man** has attracted mainstream press coverage – and curious newcomers – so that too was a given. But we realize that there are other key issues that are sold out, such as **Uncanny X-Men** #390 – the death of Colossus – or that represent good jumping-on points, like **Fantastic Four** #40. Either way, readers are missing out on the fun, and this is a way they can find out what everyone is talking about... and best of all, they're absolutely free!"

Roberts said that above all, Marvel dotComics offer convenience: "They allow the fan, who may have limited access to specialty stores, the ability to read Marvel comics from the comfort of their own home."

He said they also allow fans who may have missed an issue the opportunity to catch up, and that they offer readers the opportunity to be introduced, free of charge, to a book that they may not normally buy.

"As everyone has heard by now, the fans saved **Spider-Girl** from cancellation," added Rosemann. "But many asked how we could introduce this great book to a wider audience. That's where the Marvel dotComics program comes in. When we have a comic that we believe in, we can take action by putting it online for free. If readers like what they see with issue #33, perhaps they'll pick up the **Spider-Girl** trade paperback in October, and better yet, head into their local shop right now and seek out new issues."

In conjunction with Marvel.com's upcoming redesign, the Marvel dotComics area of the site will soon be upgraded, Roberts added. The new look will also introduce an e-mail form for people to send in feedback.

Marvel dotComics schedule for August: Aug 1 **Amazing Spider-Man** #32 (part 1) Aug 3 **Avengers** #38 (part 1) Aug 15 **Ultimate Spider-Man** #11 (part 2) Aug 17 **Ultimate X-Men** #7 (part 2) Aug 22 **Amazing Spider-Man** #32 (part 2) Aug 24 **Avengers** #38 (part 2).

IN FOCUS...

CRUMB TO MAKE RARE COMICS FESTIVAL APPEARANCE

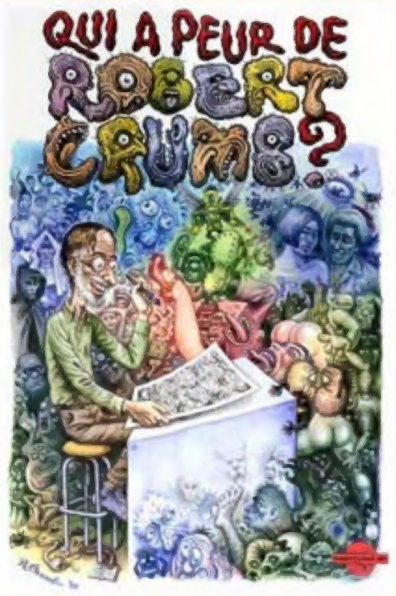
ROBERT Crumb, the legendary and reclusive underground comix artist, has been booked to appear with his band, *Les Primitives du Futur*, at the principal Flemish comics festival this December.

Thanks to a number of mass media productions ranging from his famous cover design for the 1968 Big Brother and The Holding Company LP *Cheap Thrills* to Terry Zwigoff's anecdotal 1994 film about his life and family, Crumb is the most widely known of the group of American comics artists who stepped aside from the mainstream to self publish visceral, satirical black and white comics during the late 1960s. However, he is also well known for shunning appearances in public, especially at events concerning comics, unless he is invited to appear in his capacity as an amateur musician.

So his appearance at the Stripgidsdagen in Turnhout, Belgium on December 15th, will be a rare treat for comics fans. But whether they will see anything of him other than as a member of *Les Primitives du Futur*, performing American folk, blues and vaudeville songs of the 1920s and earlier, remains open to question. In 2000 Crumb attended the 27th Festival International de la Bande Dessinée in Angoulême, France, as guest of honour and duly appeared performing with his band. However, he spent the remainder of the festival in his hotel room, reportedly watching television. His poster for the festival *(right)* was rejected.

His scheduled appearance in Turnhout is of additional interest because it combines with another primary activity of the Stripgidsdagen to suggest an increased interest on the part of the Flemish comics cognoscenti in American comics. The biennial festival, organised by Flemish fan group the Bronzen Adhemar Stichting (BAS) has in the past been devoted to celebration of Dutch language comics, with the exception of an international small press component which was introduced in 1995. Its centrepiece is the awarding of a laureate prize to a jury-selected artist in recognition of significant contributions to Flemish comics. The 2001 Laureate is Marvano (aka Marc Van Oppen), a former editor of **Tintin Magazine**, and the jury citation specifically praises him as "one of the first Flemish artists to have brought the American SF comics storytelling style before the public". Marvano's style, as seen in his series **Eeuwige Oorlog** (The Everlasting War) and **Dallas Barr**, is strongly influenced by that of Frank Miller.

The Stripgidsdagen takes place in De Warande cultural centre, Turnhout, Belgium on the weekend of December 15th-16th. Entrance is free and further information, hotel and accomodation addresses and availability plus a full schedule of events, will be made available during the autumn on the festival's website *www.stripgidsdagen.be*.



IN FOCUS...

COMICS FESTIVAL SUPPORTS VICTIMS OF FOOT & MOUTH CRISIS

FORMER *Judge Dredd* and **Batman** writer Alan Grant has organized a comics festival at his home of Moniaive, Scotland, to run from **August 29** to **September 2**, aiming to help alleviate the effects of the foot and mouth crisis on the agriculture-dependent hamlet.

Star guests include Grant himself; John Wagner, creator of *Judge Dredd, Robo-Hunter, and Strontium Dog* for **2000AD**; Cam Kennedy, artist on *Judge Dredd*, **Batman** and **Star Wars**; Frank Quitely, penciller of **New X-Men**; and Jim Murray, painter of **Batman: The Demon**.

Other guests include artist Jamie Grant, writer Dave Alexander, cartoonist Jim Stewart, **Commando Comics** and **Football Picture Story Monthly** writer Ferg Handley, and Glasgow's independent publishing team Metaphrog.

Sue Grant, Alan's wife, told **Borderline**: "They will all be forced to work very hard. We haven't yet decided on panels, but we hope that John Wagner will give a talk on character creation with Cam Kennedy sketching his ideas and points while he talks."

A comic art exhibition will run throughout the event, with more than 70 pages of original art from Alan Grant's personal collection. The exhibition will include work from artists including Simon Bisley, Mick McMahon and Carlos Ezquerra. This will be the first time these pages have ever been on public display.

Events include writer and artist workshops, talks, panels, competitions, *How to Draw and Write Your Own Comics*, and a chance to meet Moniaive's very own resident alien – *MacAlien*.

Every child attending will receive a free comic. Artists will give free sketches, and writers and artists will sign comic collections.

Sue Grant explained the reason for holding the festival: "Moniaive was badly affected by the foot and mouth crisis. Most village businesses are agriculture-related so the effect was felt by everyone, from farmers to the chimney sweep!

"In an effort to regenerate the village, we applied for some of the money that the Government has been supposedly ploughing into the area to help small businesses. Basically, we got no help.

"Since April 10 we have built a community website *(http://www.moniaive.com)*, produced a general colour leaflet about Moniaive, and started a project to record a CD of local folk musicians and singers."

This CD will be recorded live at a concert on the Saturday of the festival. Money from the CD will go towards setting up traditional music workshops. Residents are also working towards opening up the old golf course in Moniaive and building a fishing loch.

Sue said: "All these things take money, which we are having to raise ourselves. We decided to hold the comic convention because we feel it will be a real crowd-puller and give us some much-needed positive publicity – instead of burning animals!

"There is the possibility that it could be an annual event – it depends on how this goes and how much it costs."

The price of entrance is £1. Family tickets cost £2. All children under 11 will get in free. Opening hours for the exhibition are 11am-4pm daily from Wednesday 29 to Friday 31 August; weekend events 11am-6pm daily.

Moniaive is eight miles from Thornhill on the A702 and 16 miles from Dumfries on the B729. Trains run to Dumfries from Glasgow and Carlisle, and a regular bus service operates between Dumfries and Moniaive. Local accommodation will be available.

MACALIEN 3: 'Third Time Lucky'
AHA!
I SEE WHERE I'VE BEEN GOING WRONG.
WELCOME TO MONIAIVE
GALA TODAY
I NEED TO BLEND IN.
SWIPE!
NOTE 3: I HAVE ADOPTED THE CLOTHING OF THE NATIVES. NOW TO PROCEED WITH MY MISSION.
GREETINGS, EARTHLING.
I HAVE COME TO LEARN ABOUT LIFE ON YOUR PLANET.

Nomination for Wood's CZ

PUBLISHER AiT/Planet Lar have announced that Brian Wood's best-selling graphic novel **Channel Zero** has been nominated in the *Outstanding Illustrated Narrative* category of the International Horror Guild Awards.

Wood reacted: "This is unexpected, but of course very exciting news. I continue to be pleased that **Channel Zero** is reaching so many different audiences, and I hope this nomination and the subsequent attention encourages more and more people to seek it out."

The IHG Awards are, unlike many others in this field, decided by a panel of experienced reviewers and critics. Fiona Webster, one of the judging panel, described **Channel Zero** as "a very impressive and important work of, not exactly horror, but dark science fiction/alternate history."

Tooth boys get Violent!

FRAZER Irving, joint winner (alongside fellow **2000AD** artist Jock) of the National Comic Award 2001 for Best Newcomer, and the focus of Borderline's first Drawing Board feature, hasn't let success go to his head.

In keeping with his small press roots with the self-published graphic novel **The Man Who Learned To Fly**, Irving has agreed to provide a cover for the fourth issue of **Violent!**, joining fellow professionals Simon Fraser, Colin MacNeil, Jim Campbell, Paul Holden and Gordon Rennie (writing as H Janus) who have graced the small press anthology. Irving's cover will be based on *Rabid*, one of the comic's strips.

Violent! is due to publish its fourth issue in September, in time for the DreddCon2 being held in Nottingham.

Comics as therapy?

(The following is from **The Times**' website: *www.thetimes.com*)

CHILDREN as young as four are to be taught tolerance towards people with mental health and behavioural problems through the launch of four comic books that attempt to explain what it is like to be "different".

The Royal College of Psychiatrists has decided to publish the books after research showed that prejudices against the mentally ill and people with learning disabilities usually set in by the age of eight.

Sue Bailey, the college's deputy registrar, said the illustrated books were designed to be read by children aged four to seven with their teachers and parents. "If we really want to lift the stigma surrounding mental health and change attitudes, we need to go for this age range because after this it may be too late," she said.

The books, written by child and adolescent psychiatrist Anula Nikapota, aim to help children who have been stigmatised because their behaviour differs from what is considered "normal". They also aim to show other children what it is like to be on the receiving end of stigma and prejudice.

The books feature Quackeline, a duck who wants to be a swan and who represents children with low self-esteem; Streaky, the annoying little piglet who represents the hyperactive child; Peaches, a puppy who is different from all the other puppies because she has a funny voice; and Little Raja, a clumsy elephant who represents the accident-prone child.

Dr Bailey said the books, produced with the help of a £15,000 grant from the Department for Education and Skills, were part of a campaign by the college to get rid of discrimination against people with mental health problems.

"Our survey of schoolchildren found that while they are fairly sympathetic towards those who have a learning disability, their attitudes towards those with mental health problems are more like those of adults and they tend to feel that the mentally ill may have brought things on themselves to a certain extent," she said.

"The message of the books is that some children are different and that we all need to change in some way to respect others' differences."

Barry Windsor-Smith returns to the Avengers

AVENGERS: The Ultron Imperative sports a cover from Barry Windsor-Smith, returning to a comic he hasn't drawn since **Avengers** #100 (June, 1972)

In an attempt to resurrect one of the Avengers' most popular villains, Marvel has chosen to showcase the return in a one-shot 'jam' special. The all-star list of creators includes: Paul Smith, John Paul Leon, Tom Grummett, John McCrea, Pat Oliffe, Jorge Lucas, Klaus Janson, and Jim Starlin!

It is also written by a host of veterans – Kurt Busiek, Roy Thomas, Roger Stern and Steve Englehart.

The story centres around the discovery of what appears to be a form of robotic life. This new discovery soon takes on humanoid shape and is eventually patterned after Earth's Mightiest Heroes!

In true Marvel hyperbole, the House of Ideas asks: "Does this herald the resurrection of the undying Ultron – or something even more sinister?"

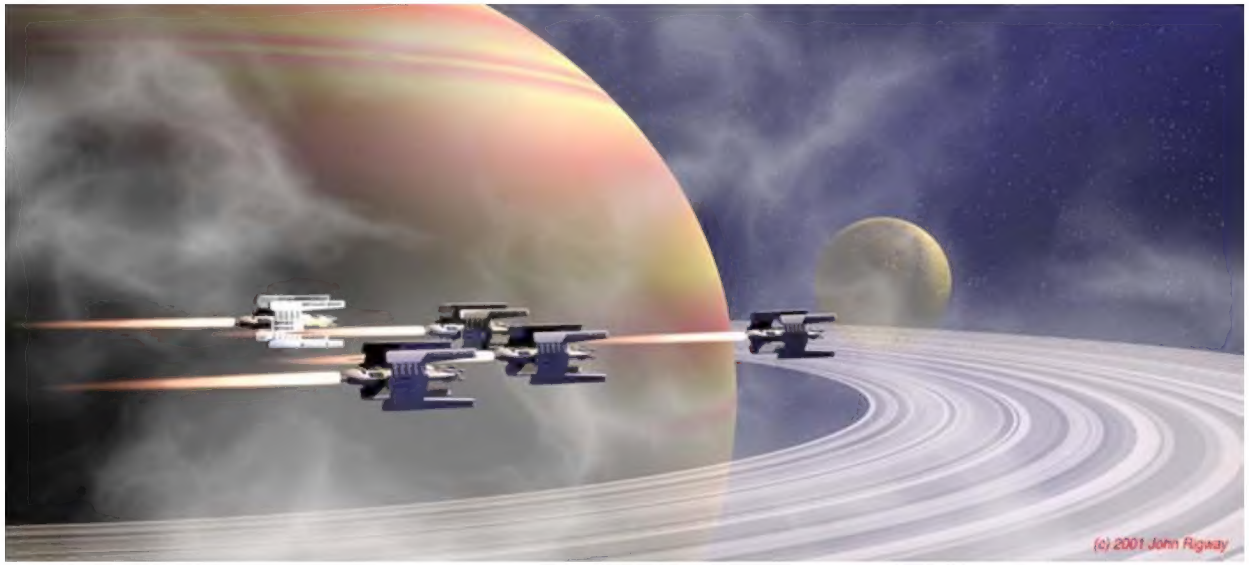
Also included in the one-shot is a pin-up section by **Avengers** artists past and present, including a never-before-published piece by Barry Windsor-Smith, plus, it is rumoured, a new Neal Adams sketch.

RETURNING to past glories? Jim Starlin previews his impending **Infinity Abyss** *Marvel miniseries on the net. Starlin's site,* www.starlin.com, *will feature pages from the writer/artist's latest chapter in his* **Infinity Saga**, *with new pages appearing every Tuesday and Friday – Starlin had worked with George Perez and Ron Lim on previous episodes of this extension to his Thanos story that originally appeared in* **Warlock**, *but this is the first of the series he's drawn himself.* **Infinity Abyss** *is scheduled for a late 01/early 02 publication.*

Striking Gold

Eureka – Mike Sivier *discovers a new UK children's comic*

YET it could be some time before this new project by former Eagle editor Derek Lord gets to fly – despite marketing tests that show Eureka would be well into profit by the end of its first year. Mike Sivier talks to Lord, and artist John Ridgway, about their planned monthly for the 8-12 year old market.



DEREK Lord has a distinguished pedigree in the world of children's comics. He was an editor of the original **Eagle** in the 1950s, and now he has come out of retirement in a bid to bring quality entertainment to the children of the 21st century.

"**Eagle** came about because there was a need for something worthwhile, of quality for the kids," he told Borderline. "There was a stream of horror comics after the war. As a result, **Eagle** sold more than 900,000 copies per week, to start off with."

He said **Eureka** came about for much the same reason: "A couple of years ago – I'm supposed to be retired now – but I was looking at things, and of course times have changed and there is a difference in presentation in what people are interested in. I didn't expect to find anything resembling the **Eagle**, but what I did find was junk at best. I thought something should be done about it.

"I tested the market, did surveys. I found that children, schools, parents and teachers were after something which had some value."

The creators hope the comic will be a 64-page monthly with four continuing comic strips, each appearing in eight-page instalments. It is designed to appeal to children of both sexes in the 8-12 age range – a market which is largely neglected by today's comics producers. And it would be distributed on newsstands, through WH Smith – and also through booksellers Waterstones.

But **Eureka** should not be confused with an educational tool, according to its leading light: "It's not directly educational. It's informative, yes, but more something to get kids away from the box. I'm all for indirect education, but **Eureka** is basically quality entertainment, indoors and out."

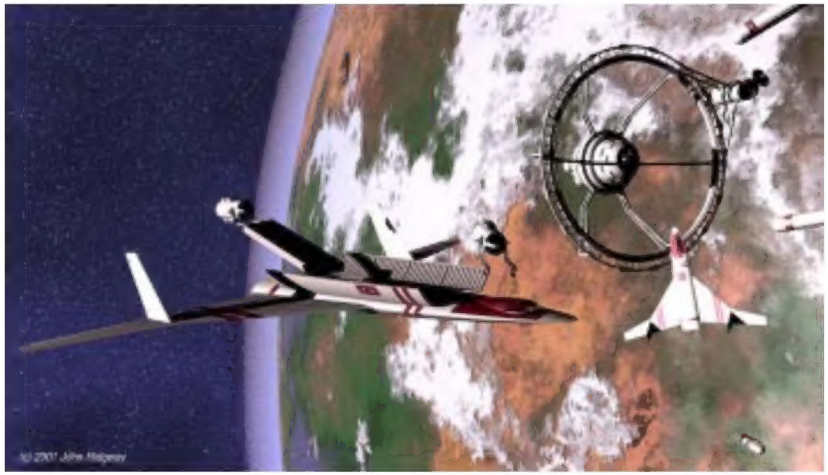
Project collaborator John Ridgway added: "We're not thinking along the lines of the **Eagle** as such. Its 1950s style is dated now. We want to attract parents and teachers as well as kids. It has been shown to a number of teachers in its early stages. In its later stage it should appeal even more."

He said: "We're intending a four-page centrespread with cutaways and technical descriptions, similar to Graham Bleathman's work on *Thunderbirds*. It can be pulled out for schools, and also collected as a proper album."

Lord agreed there was a possibility the comic would be welcomed into schools. "We can use it, with kids saying, 'Have you seen the cutaway in this week's **Eureka**?' and teachers following it up."

He said **Eureka** has reached the point where it is virtually ready to go into production. "Then we came up against the biggest stumbling block of all – finding someone to come up with the money – or a syndicate. We're in no way against sponsors or advertisers.

"We feel if we can only get onto the right people, we can do all



sorts of good things. We know from tests by our distributors that the trade in general is all for it. We would be the publishers, but it would have to be in association with someone with the right funding and back-up. We expect to be in profit within a year.

"We're at the point where, if we were given the promise of sufficient back-up, on Monday morning we would turn the light from amber to green and people would go into action. It would only take long enough for us to produce sufficient material. We're ready to go into immediate action."

The team responsible for **Eureka** is in close working harmony with Imagineering, a company with expertise in games, toys and models. Lord said: "From a merchandising point of view they will be very close from the start – and also on the continent."

Ridgway added: "They produce prototypes for toys, so anything that comes from the strips could become toys. The strips themselves are also suitable for computer games."

In putting together his team, Lord relied on several contacts from the days of **Eagle**. Peter Jackson, who did the *Marco Polo* and *Dr Livingstone* historical strips on the back of the *Eagle*, and a large body of work for **Look and Learn**, will hopefully be doing a strip about Alexander the Great, very much as the stories in the **Eagle** were done. This could also be included in album format."

But Lord pointed out: "There are a few old names working on it but some are from a new generation. Martin Baines was recently in training, even as Frank Hampson was, once upon a time, with **Eagle**."

Relative newcomer Baines is working on *Ocean Interpol*, which Ridgway described as "very much in the *Thunderbirds*/*Stingray* mould, although the drawings are more Sidney Jordan than Frank Bellamy."

Also planned is a humour strip, *Hadrian's Heroes*, "which is the Romans vs the Britons."

And **Eureka** will feature articles on different topics. Ridgway said: "We're planning a series of regular articles about horses for girl readers.

Of his own role, Lord said: "I'm an old boy, I can put in some expertise on what doesn't change that much, but we'll have people who really know how to put things over for today's children.

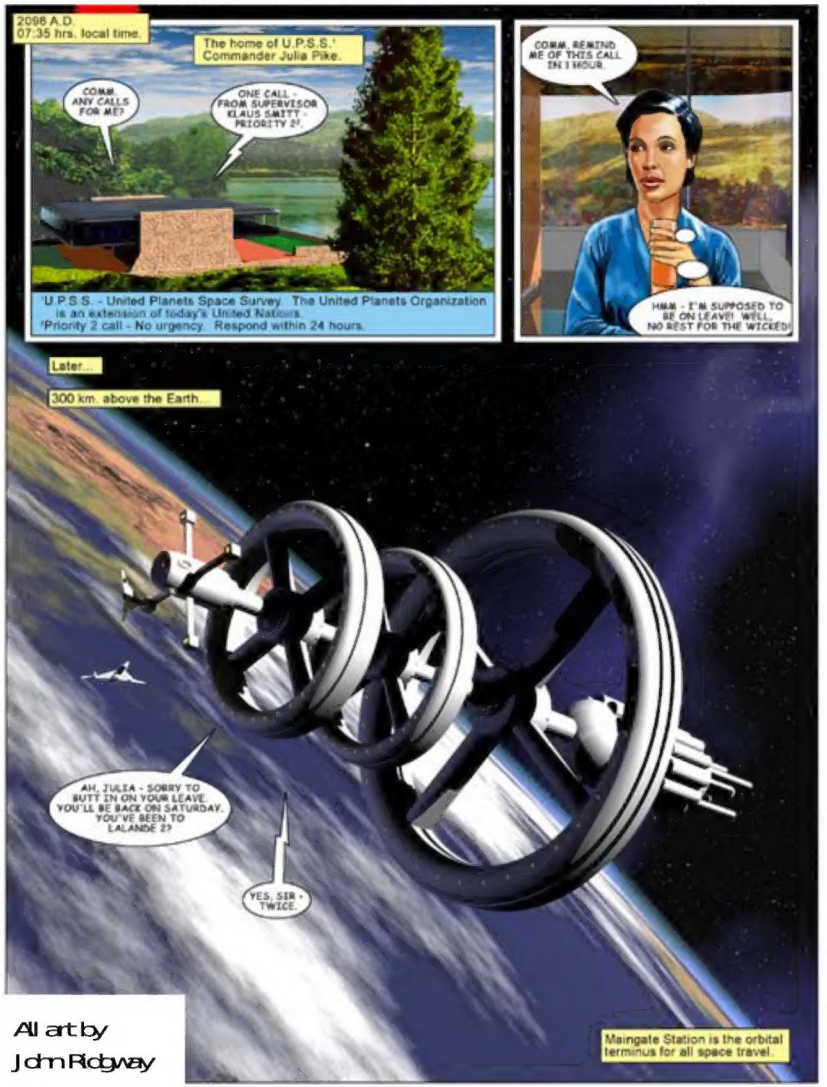
John Ridgway is working on two strips for the new comic, one provisionally entitled *Frontiers*, while the other is *Wereworld*, a melding of science fiction, fantasy and horror. He said: "The idea is that the strips will be in eight-page segments, to become 48-page albums. The albums are aimed at the European market but hopefully they will be released in this country as well. The European market is where we're primarily intending to go."

"*Wereworld* is a fantasy that is actually more SF, but I can't say too much about it now. If the magazine comes off, I'd have to hand it over to another artist. I like to do the layouts, which is what Ferg (Handley, the writer) wants. He's working on it and also developing it a lot more."

Lord added: "I look upon John Ridgway as the Frank Hampson of today. I have the feeling that Frank would have been doing what John is doing. What he can do will put us right ahead of what's being produced as it is today; it's such a tatty lot of junk coming out."

Ridgway concluded: "We have been trying for ages to get this thing off the ground. We feel we're heading in the right sort of direction to fill a gap, using WH Smith and Waterstones rather than the back street comics shops."

All it needs is a backer willing to take a chance on comics.


2098 A.D.
07:35 hrs. local time.
The home of U.P.S.S.' Commander Julia Pike.
COMM ANY CALLS FOR ME?
ONE CALL FROM SUPERVISOR KLAUS SMITT - PRIORITY 2?
'U.P.S.S. - United Planets Space Survey. The United Planets Organization is an extension of today's United Nations.
'Priority 2 call - No urgency. Respond within 24 hours.
COMM, REMIND ME OF THIS CALL IN 1 HOUR.
HMM - I'M SUPPOSED TO BE ON LEAVE!! WELL, NO REST FOR THE WICKED!
Later...
300 km. above the Earth.
AH, JULIA - SORRY TO BUTT IN ON YOUR LEAVE. YOU'LL BE BACK ON SATURDAY. YOU'VE BEEN TO LALANDE 2?
YES, SIR - TWICE
Maingate Station is the orbital terminus for all space travel.

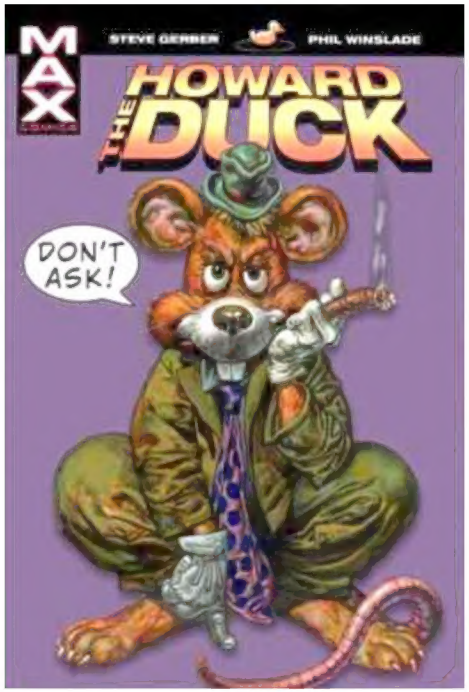
All art by John Ridgway

In the Trench

COMING from Top Shelf later this year, **Trench** is a 170-page graphic novel by Scott Mills set in France and England during World War One. Mills describes **Trench** as "the ultimate war story; it's got love, death, betrayal, loss, violence ... it's an action-packed war story with a lot of warmth and heart to it as well."

Borderline asked Mills about his project: "Well, the fine folks at Top Shelf Productions seem to prefer my historical works the most, so another period piece seemed a natural. I'd been doing some reading about the Great War at the time I was thinking of my next book. Also, the aesthetics of the battlegrounds of that era are interesting...the barbed wire, the mud, the gas, the cool helmets. It's a visual thing, one that I knew I could have fun with."

Mills considers **Trench** his favourite, and best, work to date and says it is an even more universal work than his earlier **Big Clay Pot**. "There are some heavy themes in this one, and more violence, but it's just a more complete product all around. I hope it attracts the attention of lots of history/war buffs as well. This book begs for a film adaptation...the characters are very real to me, and the plot is a natural."



A prelude to the return of the Duck

MARVEL has released information on some of their upcoming titles in their new mature readers imprint, MAX, such as **Alias** by Brian Michael Bendis and Michael Gaydos, **Fury** by Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson, **Night Nurse** by Gail Simone and **US War Machine** by Chuck Austen. On the other hand, little has been revealed by the publisher about the mooted return of **Howard The Duck**, by his creator Steve Gerber, with art by Phil Winslade.

Until the new version of the much-loved 1970's character is unveiled, the only place to see the new incarnation is inside the pages of a UK charity fanzine called **Heroes: Just 1 Page**. As well as contributions from Dave Gibbons, Bryan Talbot, Eddie Campbell, John McCrea and Duncan Fegredo, **Heroes** contains an exclusive new page of Howard the Duck, written by Steve Gerber and illustrated by Phil Winslade.

To purchase a copy of **Heroes: Just 1 Page** – Send a cheque for £3.00 with an A4 self-addressed envelope, with at least 50 pence in postage, to: Adrian Brown, 90J St George's Drive, Pimlico, London SW1V 4BZ England, or if in the United States, send a check for $5.00 plus a stamped self-addressed envelope to: Heroes, c/o 3827 2422nd Avenue SE, Issaquah WA 98029 USA Website: *http://members.aol.com/just1page*

The Russian front?

RUSSIAN dictator Joseph Stalin was a closet cartoonist, who reportedly sketched cartoons of the men he ordered to be executed, according to newly released Soviet documents.

The **New York Post** has reported that the infamous Soviet Dictator "Uncle" Joseph Stalin was, when not ordering the execution of his own countrymen, a secret cartoonist. The **Post** reports: "In one of the doodles, drawn in 1930, Stalin depicted his finance minister, Nikolai Bryukhanov, naked and hanging from a rope by his genitals. And in a note attached to the drawing, Stalin wrote: "To all members of the Politburo, for all his present and future sins, Bryukhanov should be hung by his balls."

Bryukhanov was later executed on Stalin's orders in 1938 after being convicted on trumped-up charges. Stalin allegedly drew these doodles during meetings of his Politburo.

Editorial merry-go-round

*IN AN editorial merry-go-round, several respected editors are either losing their posts or simply moving on. Long-time Marvel editor Bobbie Chase has been let go by the company, as have fellow editor Matt Hicks and his assistant Frank Dunkerley. Chase's titles **Fantastic Four** and **Spider-Girl** will in future be edited by Tom Brevoort, while Hicks's charges **X-Treme X-Men** and **Cable** will now be under the guidance of Mark Powers.*

In a related story, Beau Smith has announced his resignation from Todd McFarlane Productions, citing his intention to "amp up my freelance writing career."

Bunny hops out!

AFTER 12 years of publication, the small press saga of **Sleaze Castle** has come to an end, with the resignation of writer/co-creator Dave McKinnon. The Newcastle-on-Tyne-based independent publisher Gratuitous Bunny Comix will continue with spin-off series **Petra Etcetera** (Eagle Award nominated and winner of the *National Comic Award 2001* for Best Self-published or Indy Comic), **Surreal School Stories** and the forthcoming **Beautiful Freak**, by Terry Wiley.

McKinnon said, regarding his departure: "I've asked [Wiley and Kermode] not to continue the 'main story' of **Sleaze Castle** and, although I've given Terry what few notes I have, they're going to respect my wish." **Sleaze Castle** may not be widely known outside the UK small press scene, but it is worth noting that Gratuitous Bunny Comix were, alongside Valkyrie Press's editions of Bryan Talbot's **Adventures of Luther Arkwright**, UK pioneers of US format comics and of reprint collections.

Slabbed Concrete

THE UK-based publisher Slab-O-Concrete has closed for business due to cashflow problems. Founder Peter Pavement is reportedly devastated by the loss.

The news has spread by word of mouth, leaving many people stunned and often angry that such a thing could happen.

Inspired by the Fast Fiction mail order service in the 1980s, **Zum!** magazine in the early 90s, and building on the vibrant underground comics scene that had developed in the UK, Peter Pavement set up Slab-O-Concrete as a small distributor.

Initially covering UK small press comics and fanzines, he soon started importing publications from abroad: notably Australian zinesters *Floozy* and American mini-comics. Slab began to make links with the radical political zine and underground publishing scene and, along with a healthy relationship with the European scene, soon became an eclectic and constantly interesting enterprise.

Slab started publishing their own comics, first with the **Microzine Monthly** series, (a run of tiny 24-page samplers selling for 50p), and releasing anthologies taken from the Slab back catalogue. Soon, there were original comics and books, often collecting and repackaging important works from the small press scene and giving them the professional package they deserved.

Whether it was premeditated or in retrospect, Slab rarely depended on the UK comics industry as its base, preferring to explore new avenues and distribution channels to get the stuff out there and read. The contacts Peter had developed around the world spread the load and he seriously investigated bookshops via the distributor Turnaround. Discovering The Book Factory, a low-volume, low cost printer from whom many other UK publishers benefited, and using his wide range of distribution outlets for pre-orders, he was able to release a respectable number of books while keeping costs under control.

Slab-O-Concrete was in essence Peter Pavement and vice versa. While this kind of personal vision-driven enterprise can be fatal, it was Peter's involvement in the DIY zine scene and the socially responsible ethics that pervade it that made Slab so important. To those in the industry prepared to pay attention, Peter's approach to the creation of a viable and vibrant business was an inspiration. That it has been laid low by the very ideals it rejected is a tragedy and the UK comics industry is poorer for it.

We will be running an in depth look at Slab-O-Concrete in a future issue. If you have memories of Slab you'd like to share, please get in touch. *pete@bugpowder.com*

The Scottish Cartoon Art Studio

A Rising Star in Glasgow's East End

IN FOCUS...

WAY back in the Depression-ridden America of the 1930's, Will Eisner set up a studio of comics artists which spawned the likes of Bob Kane and Jack Kirby. Back in April of 1999, in the centre of Glasgow, Chris Somerville set up just such a model, with initial funding provided by The Youth Business Trust (a part of The Prince's Trust), and Glasgow's East End Partnership. A year later proprietor and founder Chris was joined by Terry Anderson as manager.

The Scottish Cartoon Art Studio, recently resituated in a converted school in the city's Duke Street, currently houses a total of seven full- and part-time artists on a co-operative basis. No job is too small or too large for the creative talents therein, as their impressive list of clients testifies. If work for **Dandy** and **Beano** proprietors D.C.Thomson isn't impressive enough, along with work for BBC Scotland, then the name of Walt Disney Associates damn well should be. Especially when Terry explains the job had to be delivered to a 48-hour deadline.

Establishing a reputation for quality and dependability in a short space of time contributed to the Studio operating at a profit in its first year of a five-year plan. The objective of that plan? For cooperative members to be making a full-time living from cartooning. No more, no less. What could be more noble than that?

A sub-objective is to offer a place to work for the local talent when they get fed up being cooped up alone in that garret – you know, the one that grows out of the top of any aspiring artist's house – instead of having to travel down south in search of decent facilities and support. At the Studio, artists can work on their own thing, whilst completing any of the varied commissions that Chris and Terry generate. This can range from caricatures through political cartoons to full-blown strips in any genre. As Terry explains, there are dozens of commercial artists out there, but there are very few who know their way around the comics format. In other words, the Studio fills a gap in the local market, which is good news for all concerned.

Creative objectives centre around setting up a major exhibition of the group's work and getting the Studio known as a creative entity in its own right. To this end they've already visited the San Diego con where they've rubbed shoulders with such as Matt Groening and Bill Morrison from Bongo Comics as well as Sergio Aragonés. Future trips planned include attending the major French conventions, raising the profile of the Studio whilst simultaneously indulging in Terry and Chris's passion for the European graphics scene, where of course comics are rightly an accepted art form. Who said Europe was all bad?

Virtually every big Scottish name in the comics scene is either a personal friend of the Studio or has operated from there for a spell. Just before X-Superstardom came Frank Quitely's way, he was contemplating taking a board at the Studio. In fact – at their former King Street base – a fair bit of Quitely's earlier original work from Electric Soup was sold via the front shop. "I wish we had more," laughs Terry, "It flew out the door." Cam Kennedy, Gary Erskine and Grant Morrison are not unknown visitors when nearby. And some bloke called Charles Windsor, from London, in his role as head of the Prince's Trust, popped in recently to be presented with a montage of caricatures the group had drawn. He actually was "amused", to paraphrase his great granny, who had a bit of Scottishness in her (allegedly).

Terry Anderson knows only too well how difficult it is to get a foothold in comics. A year and a half at Joe Kubert's school in New Jersey taught Terry more than just good comics technique – but that's a long story in itself. The Studio offers a base for young people with talent to grow creatively in an environment which positively screams comics. Chris's enthusiasm for comic art is intoxicatingly infectious. Any man who can survive being dubbed a "comics fanatic" by the local Glasgow press has to be at least an enthusiast.

These guys are doing something they love and it shows. They're always looking for new blood, but value commitment and natural talent more than paper qualifications. Like everywhere else a great portfolio is the best introduction. They may even spot some potential superstar at the regular workshops they run or through offering local schoolkids work placements.

There's no substitute for the old pencil and ink, but they also indulge in the computer-generated image. There's a website of course, www.scottishcartoons.com, and plans for two original graphic novels in "early 2002", which they don't want to say too much just yet. In short, the future looks bright in Duke Street. Taking my leave of Terry and Chris, I couldn't help but think that if The Scottish Cartoon Art Studio had been around 25 years ago.... *David McLintock*

DC not skimping on merchandise or press releases

HAVING set the trend for news embargoes, DC showed its willingness at this years San Diego Comic Convention to talk about forthcoming projects. However, despite a moment of surprising openness, the only information DC Comics made available to attendees of Comic-Con International was that of its DC Direct (the merchandising arm) products through October of 2002.

The company is releasing a barrage of statues and busts, including:

- January: A **Green Arrow** statue
- January: A classic **Superman** mini bust
- February: **Superman: Departure from Krypton** statue
- March: A classic **Batman** mini bust
- April: A **Krypto** statue
- June: An animated cartoon **Catwoman** statue
- 2002: **JLA** animated cartoon statuettes of Wonder Woman, Hawkgirl, Martian Manhunter, Green Lantern John Stewart, Superman, the Flash and Batman
- 2002 schedule: A **Dark Knight Strikes Again** Statue – featuring Catgirl sitting on Batman's shoulder

DC Comics follows up on this fall's **Sandman** and **Harley Quinn** snowglobes in February, with a **Wonder Woman** snowglobe.

Green Lantern fans will have a full choice of which Green Lantern ring prop – complete with power battery base – to choose from, once the Sinestro ring prop is released in June and the Kyle Rayner prop is released in October. DC will also be releasing the next of their larger power battery props, with an Alan Scott Green Lantern power battery prop released in March.

Green Lanterns will also be well-represented in the action figures of the coming months, with Tomar Re and John Stewart arriving in stores in January and Fatality and Kyle Rayner arriving in stores in February.

Other 2002 action figures include **Black Adam** (complete with mystical amulet) and **Shazam!** (with Mr. Mind sitting on one shoulder), both arriving in stores in April.

The Just-Us League of Stupid Heroes, featuring **Mad Magazine**'s Alfred E. Neuman dressed as members of DC Comics' **Justice League**, continues in 2002. In March, action figures of Alfred dressed as Green Lantern and as the Flash will be released, and in September, figures of him dressed as Robin and Green Arrow will be arriving in stores.

Finally, the Silver Age **Superboy** and **Supergirl** will come in a deluxe set, featuring Krypto the Superdog and Streaky the Supercat, in a pack scheduled for the third quarter of 2002.

DC will be releasing two PVC figure sets in the next six months: a Smallville PVC set in December and a shiny Metal Men set in January.

DC will also be continuing with their soft toy line: Ace the Bathound arrives in stores in January, a **Sandman** two-pack (Morpheus and Daniel) is in stores in March and **Sugar and Spike** will be in stores in May.

The Just-Us League of Stupid Heroes, *featuring* ***Mad Magazine****'s Alfred E. Neuman dressed as DC Comics' Batman and Superman – note the similarity in the two Alfred Es, presumably the entire Just-Us League will be the same doll dressed up differently?*

In sickness and health

ON July 3rd 2001, a bold initiative was launched to try to give something back to veteran writers and artists in the comics industry. Many of these have not been well provided for in their retirement, since freelance contracts during their working years did not include health benefits or retirement plans.

The publicly supported and federally chartered charity organisation known as ACTOR (A Commitment To Our Roots) was the brainchild of Jim McLauchlin of Wizard Entertainment, and has many high-ranking officials from companies such as Chaos! Comics, CrossGen Comics, Dark Horse Comics, Image Comics, Marvel Comics and Wizard Entertainment. Support is coming in the form of charitable donations and pledges from Hollywood celebrities and other creative people including *Clerks* director Kevin Smith, *Seinfeld* writer David Madel, and even Marvel Comics founder, Stan Lee, who said: "ACTOR needs and deserves everyone's wholehearted support. There is no better way to show our appreciation to those who, in the infancy of comic books, gave so much reading enjoyment to so many for so little reward."

For more information or to send donations: ACTOR (A Commitment To Our Roots), 11301 Olympic Blvd, #587, Los Angeles, CA 90064.

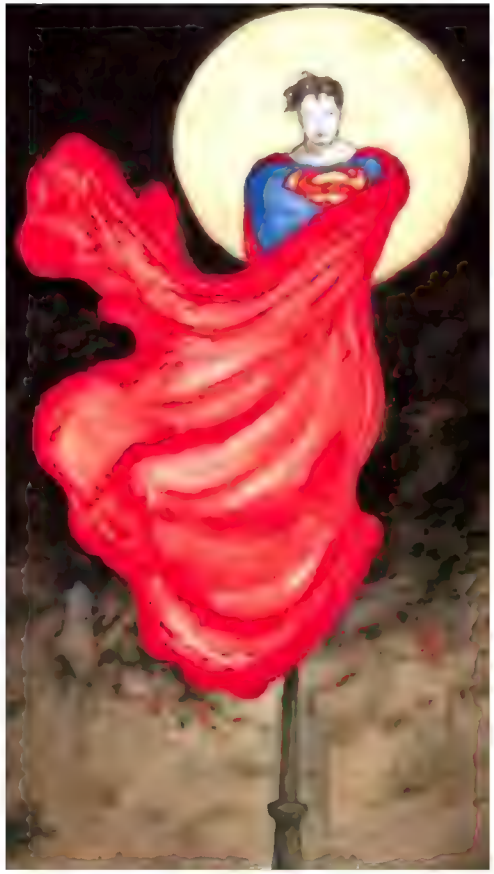
DC's Mangaman?

THE acclaimed artist of ***The Sandman: The Dream Hunters****, and one of the team behind the development of the* Final Fantasy *computer games, Yoshitaka Amano, has painted a unique vision of Superman: the Man of Steel.*

DC has just released a new 22" x 34" poster (a companion piece to the Batman piece Amano did earlier this year).
The poster retails for $7.95 – in stores now.

Yoshitaka Amano has become something of a cult figure since illustrating the Sandman graphic novel in 1999. So much so, he's been recruited by Marvel for a forthcoming prestige team-up: **Wolverine/ Elektra: The Redeemer**.

Written by Greg Rucka, the 3-issue illustrated novel debuts in November.



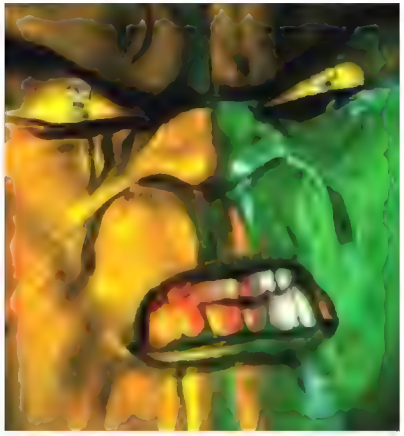
INDUSTRY STANDARD

The people and the publishers that are shaking up the comics industry

WAS Joe Quesada's much publicized announcement that artists who could be considered as 'over the hill' will have to move aside to let the new talent flourish something a little more devious and clever than just another headline grabber in the industry press?

Look at the initial reactions to that statement. Many fans and industry professionals saw it as the death knell of a specific age of comics, while others applauded the decision. A lot of professionals must have received their final paycheques from Marvel and there must surely be many more yet to follow. The slant taken by the comics industry press was that the old timers were but the first in what would become a major exodus.

In fact, that couldn't be further from the truth. Quesada has Marvel's balance sheets in front of him, probably shoved under his nose by Bill Jemas' keepers; and Marvel is beginning to work. The share price appears to have bottomed out and has shown definite signs of improvement on Wall Street and, more importantly, what publisher is comics fandom talking about at the moment? Marvel Comics: love it or loathe it, the company has the knack of doing something every so often that turns it around. It just so happens that this time an attempt has been made to rejuvenate the company by using quality *and* quantity.



Quesada could earn much respect and improve his position as a revolutionary editor-in-chief if he was to go public and acknowledge that the comics industry could well be dead in 30 years, by which time the last great collectors may have passed into oblivion. Because hidden behind all of Quesada's rhetoric is one message – Marvel needs to give what's left of the comic collecting and buying public what they want rather than try to attract an infeasibly large intake of new customers, enough customers to ensure the long-term future of the comics industry as an *industry*.

It's an admirable idea, if Quesada and Jemas have indeed approached it from this angle. It could even work, as it has for all of their attempts at revitalization so far. One problem with it, as with Shooter's years at Marvel and Carmine Infantino's at DC, may be that it is Quesada and Jemas' personal vision. These men will attempt to make the comics they are responsible for producing in the way they think people want them to be made. Personal visions don't always work. And this one may be affected by the fact that Jemas, the corporate side of Marvel, has his fingers firmly in the pie. Film critic Barry Norman once said, "When producers start interfering with directors, you know you have problems". Or, perhaps more importantly, how do you apply quantity control to the man who's pulling your purse strings? The last time this kind of pairing of corporate energy and editorial vision was seen at one of the Big Two, the result was the DC 'Implosion' of 1978.

CGI covers (left) and Wolverine's origin are examples of innovative steps taken by Marvel to attract different kinds of existing readers

But comics today is definitely a 'free market'. Unlike in the '60s or '70s there is an abundance of artistic talent out there, able to produce a comicbook in a variety of styles, and able to produce an issue per week or per year depending on the size of the ego. The 'studio system' hardly exists in its old form anymore and this is where Quesada might have given the industry a real shot in the arm.

What he's done is thrown down the gauntlet to *all* comics creators, young and old, virgin or veteran. He's saying, "Produce the best damned stuff you can, because you guys have been having it far too easy for 30 years! If you have got *real* talent, I couldn't give a shit if your name is Jim Lee or Fred Bloggs! If it impresses me, you get a shot!". And surely this is the most proactive way for a publisher to take back the initiative. After all, if the publisher wasn't giving these slackers work month in month out, would the industry's quality threshold have slipped so far?

As Marvel's PR guru Bill Rosemann said, "When Joe talks about 'new' talent, he's not talking about the literal age of the creators. In fact, if you tally up the ages of all the creators working for us, we have, on average, more older creators working for us right now than ever before. We don't care if you're in the Jim Starlin and Steve Englehart class or have just graduated from high school... we just want the best creators, period. "New talent" doesn't mean "young talent" – it means "fresh, dynamic talent." See, the cool thing about comics is, the age, gender, religion, sexual preference, and/or politial leanings of the creators doesn't matter – the only thing that counts is what's on the page... and right now, Marvel wants the best!"

First and foremost, Marvel is out to make money. It isn't a place for old friends to sit around, cosy in the knowledge that they're mates with the boss, or a place where your workforce is operating at '70s efficiency levels, when the rest of the world is welcoming 21st-century business approaches. If the comics industry's new Glimmer Twins were going to make Marvel effectual they needed to do something a bit different.

First we saw an unprecedented manipulation of the mainstream and comics press through regular White-House-styled press conferences. They shook up everything by introducing yet another attempt to spin off fresh material from their successful icons – and, by some miracle of modern comics history, it actually worked! Each announcement that Marvel made was greeted with "oohs" and "ahhs" from the watching galleries of fans. Even the pros and journos were sitting up and taking notice. We'd seen innovative comics writing and artwork generated by creative young Turks before, but we'd never seen *anyone* really take a comics publisher as big as Marvel and shake it by the scruff of the neck from an editorial position. Not even Jim Shooter, because all he did was apply the then modern methods to a tried and tested formula. Marvel's sales curve is on the up for the first time in years and that's after eyebrows were raised all round by the cancellation of many money making titles.

Secondly, if Quesada and Jemas have recognised that we are probably living in an industry with a finite lifespan, they are going to need to be thinking about their long-term futures. Being in control of Marvel at the moment is a bit like taking over a football team that is in danger of being relegated to a lower division. They need to turn results around fast enough to safeguard their immediate futures. Then, even if it means recruiting some of the most expensive team players available, they need to speculate in order to accumulate. In today's world, you have to spend big to get bigger results. If Marvel can attract the creators Quesada believes the fans want to see, then it may get a fatter slice of the crumbling market share cake. And the more projects it assigns to interesting and diverse creators, the greater its chance of securing disillusioned DC and Image fans, and perhaps even indie fans.

It's going to be interesting to watch Marvel over the coming months. A good catch phrase for the publisher at the moment could be "Expect the Unexpected", because that is what is happening there – the unexpected. From Julie Bell painting covers for almost nondescript X-character miniseries to the creator of *Babylon 5* writing the **Amazing Spider-Man**, Marvel appears to be making the kind of moves we all, as comic fans, can appreciate. For the first time since before Jack Kirby first left Marvel there is a feeling that all is rocking in the House of Ideas.

Phil Hall

*Cover image from **Mutant X** (right): Marvel continues to evangelise its most popular line, even if it means tying it in with new television series*

The Most Important Comics Film Ever?

Could a Bruce Willis movie possibly change the general public's attitude towards comicbooks? Jay Eales investigates...

UNBREAKABLE

THE most important film, as far as the superhero genre in particular is concerned, was not made in 1989. Neither was it an adaptation of an existing work, though some similarity with realistic worldview superhero comics can be identified. The film in question was not accompanied by the rolling out of a merchandising bandwagon. It stars A-list talent in Bruce Willis and Samuel L. Jackson, and manages to avoid the usual pitfalls of the genre. You can lay responsibility for that squarely at the feet of writer/director M. Night Shyamalan, whose previous film, *The Sixth Sense*, breathed fresh life into the ghost story. He then brought the sensibilities of that film to bear on *Unbreakable*; slowly pacing, with the emphasis firmly placed on dialogue and characterisation rather than leaping from set-piece to set-piece. The concept is simple enough: a man discovers that he is a superhero. Nothing too earth shattering there, you might think, but Shyamalan chooses to present his story without a hint of camp, Adam West-style antics, or even the Goth fairy tale posturing of Tim Burton's reinvention of the Dark Knight in *Batman*.

REAL LIFE DOESN'T FIT INTO LITTLE BOXES THAT WERE DRAWN FOR IT

The film opens and closes with onscreen captions, and while I won't spoil the ending for you it should be acknowledged that this big Hollywood production dares to have these words as the first things the audience sees:

"There are 35 pages and 124 illustrations in the average comic book.

A single issue ranges in price from $1.00 to over $140,000.

172,000 comics are sold in the U.S. every day.

Over 62,780,000 each year.

The average comic collector owns 3,312 comics and will spend approximately 1 year of his or her life reading them."

THERE IS A SOLE SURVIVOR, AND HE IS MIRACULOUSLY UNHARMED

Unbreakable is the story of two flawed men – one with unbreakable bones, one who suffers from the disease osteogenesis imperfecta, which causes his bones to shatter at the least impact – and how their lives intersect. There are no comic book absolutes of good and evil here, just all the hues in between. In fact, part of Shyamalan's style is the clever use of colour in his movies. In *The Sixth Sense*, the colour red was used as an indicator of supernatural interference. In *Unbreakable*, as Bruce Willis' character, David Dunn, starts to accept the possibility that he may be more than mortal, the people he interacts with wear more primary colours than others in the film. As Elijah Price, Samuel L Jackson plays the owner of an art gallery, specialising in comic art, giving Shyamalan (and comic collector Jackson) a mouthpiece with which to elevate the medium of comics from the preconception of it as a thing of childhood value alone.

In Shyamalan's own words, "This is normally the first act of a movie, this whole movie. And I'm going to make an entire movie about a guy realising he's a superhero." This was not his initial plan, however. "We started out with a very traditional movie, where the first act was him realising his powers, second act was him fighting good and bad, and in the third act he's fighting the ultimate villain," but Shyamalan found himself unable to connect with the character of David Dunn as he would have been in acts two and three, in the way he did with him in the act one. Great pains were taken to maintain an air of hyper-realism in the film – it is not *quite* believable, and yet the emotional reactions seem honest, and allow a suspension of disbelief. No spandex costume for this superhero; Dunn wears the waterproof hooded poncho from his day job as a security guard at a Philadelphia sports stadium, a clever real world analogy of the cape and cowl of more outlandish comic book heroes such as The Spectre.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE SCARIEST THING IS? TO NOT KNOW YOUR PLACE IN THIS WORLD

While *Unbreakable* has not eclipsed Shyamalan's biggest hit, The Sixth Sense, the film has performed successfully. It opened well, but did not display the extraordinary staying power of the previous film, which has now racked up more than $160 million.

Unbreakable's US box office takings to date are estimated at $95 million. In its recent release for rental video and DVD, it took $17.2 million in its opening week and topped VideoScan's First Alert DVD sales chart for the week ending July 1st, knocking *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* from the top spot. Not bad for a superhero movie that dared to be different, eh?

UNBREAKABLE ON DVD

The DVD Region 1 release of *Unbreakable* contains the usual complement of special features that fans of the format have come to expect, but there are two items of particular note to comics fans. One is two collectible illustrations by artist Alex Ross, who was involved in the production from an early stage; the other, more importantly, is a twenty-minute documentary entitled *Comic Books and Superheroes*. It features contributions from a host of famous comic creators and Samuel L Jackson, who reveals his passion for comics and reminisces about growing up with Archie and Veronica and collecting Superman comics. He also reveals his technique for encouraging friends to get into the hobby: "If I had someone that didn't know a lot about comics, I would take them into the comic book store, and depending on their sensibilities, I would give them all the Frank Miller I could find."

Other participants in the documentary include Will Eisner, Scott McCloud, Alex Ross, Trina Robbins, Denny O'Neil, Frank Miller, Michael Chabon and Dave Gibbons, talking about the medium they

continues over

work in, and how the superhero genre came to dominate it. Images are drawn from **Sin City**, **Go Girl!** and **The Spirit**, with art design by Alex Ross. Will Eisner goes into detail about how the Spirit came into being, and how he developed a technique for using panel layouts in order to get around pacing problems: "Panels, I learned, became part of the vocabulary, the punctuation. They affect the rate of reading; they affect the psychological approach that you take to the story. They can convey claustrophobia [and] they can convey openness." Frank Miller elaborates, "I'm mad about the idea of closure [...] how much the eye can do with how little information, which I think is the entire science of comic books. I mean, you only get one image out of a potential thousand as you read a comic book. You're creating so many between those panels, it's wonderful!"

The documentary ranges from the early days of comics and the contribution of Jewish immigrants and their children to the melting pot of superheroes, to how in the Eighties, with **Watchmen** and **The Dark Knight Returns** and their ilk, superheroes began to get darker and grittier, diminishing the heroic archetype. Michael (**The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay**) Chabon describes the Man of Steel thus: "It's very easy to look at the Superman story as being at least in part the story of an immigrant; an immigrant from another world. And of course, Siegel and Shuster, these were two sons of immigrants." Trina Robbins adds: "It seems that the majority of them grew up in New York, grew up in either the slums or at least working class neighbourhoods. These kids lived in apartment buildings – they didn't live in single family dwellings in the suburbs. [...] They were brought up on the American Dream." Dave Gibbons, on the subject of **Watchmen**'s genesis, says: "Supposing superheroes really existed [...] and there was a real Superman, for instance. What would he be like? When you extrapolate from that, you realise that the people that were given superpowers, or who decided to fight crime, might do it for much more human reasons than just this kind of abstract 'I have been gifted with powers, so I must save the world!'" Frank Miller again: "I don't need a character to be able to fly [...] to be heroic to me. There ain't that much difference between a cape and a trenchcoat anyway."

The documentary packs a lot into its twenty minutes, and incredibly, apart from the briefest of comments, doesn't refer to the movie at all. This is no fluff piece. I take great heart in knowing that film-makers like Shyamalan are out there, acting as ambassadors for the comics medium, bringing it into thousands of homes that might otherwise remain ignorant of comics outside of Lois and Clark, or the last *Batman* or *X-Men* summer blockbuster. May this be seen as a blueprint for future film-makers: superhero movies don't have to be made with one eye on a franchise and the other on the CGI special effects budget.

Millennium Rebellion

The future of the UK's premier fantasy comic

IT HAS now been over a year since software development company Rebellion and former assistant editor Andy Diggle took the reins of the old warhorse of the UK comics scene. It has injected fresh adrenalin and an old-school approach to the task begun by previous grand fromage David Bishop – who has returned to the editorship of the newly re-launched **Judge Dredd Megazine**. It has been a long struggle to arrest the general trend towards dropping circulation, but **2000AD** has well and truly turned the corner and is building momentum, clawing back some of the 100,000 lapsed readers from its glory days, while many other staples of the newsagent's shelf, most recently the girls' comic **Bunty**, have fallen due to poor sales.

A veritable slew of **2000AD** projects is in the works, from computer game adaptations of strips like *Judge Dredd* to a new deal struck with Titan Books which will see a new **2000AD** book on the shelves every month. There are plans afoot to make the archive of **2000AD**'s back-catalogue available on CD-Rom, in a similar way to that pioneered by **Mad Magazine**. On September 29th DreddCon 2, the second annual 2000AD convention, takes place at the Galleries of Justice in Nottingham, launching an extensive exhibition of *Judge Dredd* artwork which will continue long after the convention is over. At Christmas, celebrating the 25th anniversary of 2000AD, there are plans for "The Mother of All Parties" and the release of Prog 2002, featuring *Judge Dredd*, by John Wagner and Cam Kennedy, in a final confrontation with his long-time nemesis, Marlon Shakespeare AKA Chopper.

Also in Prog 2002 *Shakara*, the latest series from the pen of Robbie Morrison, co-creator of *The Adventures of Nikolai Dante* and many other **2000AD** favourites, makes its debut. The series is brought to life by Henry Flint, the artist who, more than any other, was responsible for **2000AD** taking the plunge and committing to a regular slot in monochrome after years of

continues over

Artwork: previous – Dredd by Jock
Artwork: this page – 13 by Andy Clarke
Shakara by Henry Flint

full colour throughout. What may seem a retrograde step makes perfect sense with an artist like Flint, whose style seems to suit the black and white form so well. Building on the success of Flint's *Nemesis: Book X* and *Deadlock* series, Morrison has written something allowing Flint the opportunity to go wild with imaginative designs for alien lifeforms and landscapes.

Shakara concerns a far future vigilante character of the same name, a remorseless dark angel, whose identity remains shrouded in mystery behind his "Visage of Vengeance." One of the key points of the series will be the uncovering of exactly who, or what Shakara actually is. At Flint's suggestion, *Shakara* will adopt spot-colour, in a manner similar to Frank Miller's **Sin City** and Matt Wagner's **Grendel: Black, White & Red**. This will be the first time that **2000AD** has used the technique.

According to Morrison's draft proposal: "The Shakara were exterminated in the most abominable act of interstellar genocide the universe has ever seen, their mighty civilization reduced to a death-world, their entire race wiped out. Without the Shakara, the universe was plunged into a time of terror and tyranny. The forces of evil and darkness ruled supreme…

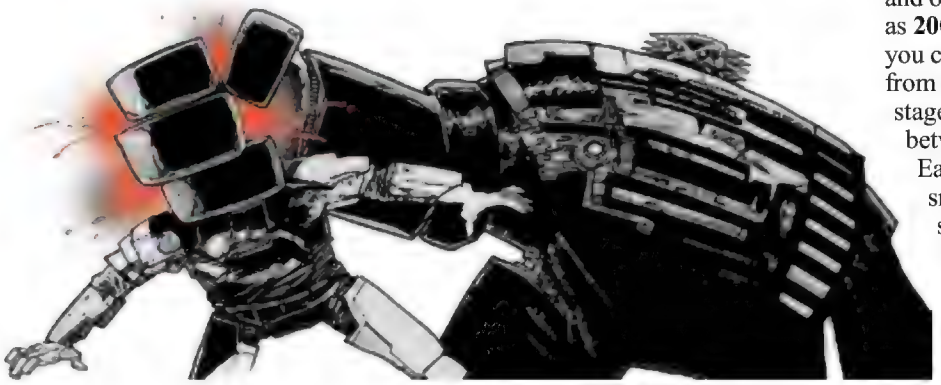
"And then the killings began, slowly at first, then growing like a tidal wave, targeting the galaxy-spanning conspiracy which masterminded the Shakaran genocide and the monstrous creatures who served them.

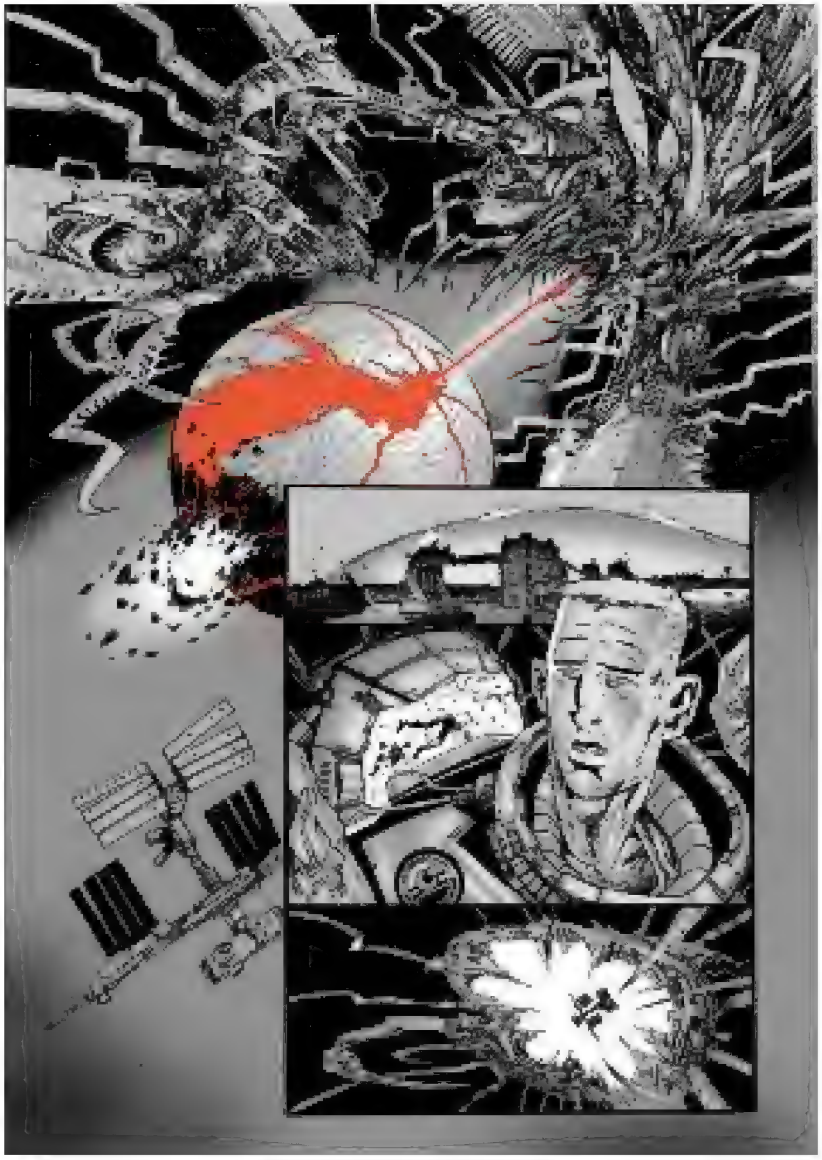
"Rumours and fearful whispers spread throughout the universe, telling of a being who hunted evil as if driven from beyond the grave, a relentless, remorseless, unstoppable force of vengeance and retribution who uttered only one word to his victims…

'Shakara'"

Set to debut a few months later is *13* by Mike Carey and Andy Clarke.

Eisner-nominated writer Mike Carey, fresh from the debut story for his *Carver Hale* in **2000AD** and continuing to write the award-winning **Lucifer** for DC Vertigo, introduces this latest project, which postulates that Earth is in reality a custom-built world created by the true ancestors of the human race – the thirteenth such world, hence the series' title. It was stolen away by a servant race, who hid it behind an impregnable barrier for reasons unknown. All this is ancient history. Fast forward to the present, the Popkiss Paranormal Research Trust and our hero, Joe Bulmer, described as **2000AD**'s first punk hero, unless you count Spikes Harvey Rotten from early *Judge Dredd* stories. The stage is set for confrontation between two alien races, with Earth as the prize, and only a small group of quirky psychics standing in the way. The nearest comparison one can make for the series would seem to be with DC's **The Invisibles** or perhaps *The Matrix*, but it is filtered through a uniquely **2000AD** approach. Andy Clarke is best known for his work on *Sinister Dexter* and *Rose O'Rion*, also for **2000AD**.



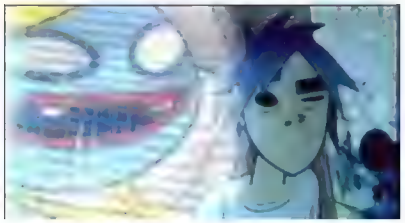


Shakara is due to commence in the special Prog 2002, available just before Christmas.

13 is scheduled to appear next year in the May 1st "Anarchy In The UK" issue, timed to coincide with the Take Back the Streets protest in London, alongside the new series of *Devlin Waugh: Red Tide*, written as always by series creator John Smith and fully painted by Jock, joint winner of the National Comic Award 2001 for Best Newcomer.

Jay Eales

Sunshine in a bag?



GORILLAZ, the virtual pop collective masterminded by Damon (Blur) Albarn and Jamie Hewlett of Tank Girl fame, find themselves in confrontation with their record company, Parlophone, after being nominated for the 10th Mercury Music Prize.

The band have requested that they be removed from the shortlist, but Parlophone managing director Keith Wozencroft has insisted that they remain, explaining: "I feel that the Gorillaz have made a fantastic album, and that is why I entered it."

Currently, Gorillaz are regarded as hot favourites to win against competition from Radiohead, Basement Jaxx and PJ Harvey. Speaking for the rest of the band, renowned hip-hop producer Dan 'The Automator' Nakamura described the nomination as "like carrying a dead albatross around your neck for eternity."

Whether this is an example of headline-grabbing in an industry notorious for such stunts, or a genuine plea from the cartoon popsters, 2-D, Noodle, Murdoc, Russel, and all the artists who hide behind their animated personae, not to take it all so seriously, only time will tell. The result will be announced on September 11th.

*A sneak peak at a forthcoming special Sabretooth story for **X-Men Unlimited**. Drawn by Mike Collins, it is one of six stories that focus on the nastier characters in the X-Universe – the story is a 9-panel, single page vignette written by Buddy Scalera.*

Small press convention

THE annual UK small press convention Caption, now in its tenth year, will be held at the Oxford Union on August 18th-19th. As in previous years there is an overall theme: this time numerous panels, workshops and exhibitions will be built around the concept of romance. Donations of artwork on that theme for the charity auction are welcomed, with proceeds from the auction going to the Cartoon Art Trust.

Admission for the weekend will cost £8 in advance (£5 unwaged) and £10 on the door: Sunday-only admission costs £3 in advance or £4 on the door. Cheques, made payable to CAPTION, should be sent to Caption 2001, 18 Hawkins Street, Oxford, OX4 1YD. Further information may be found at the convention web site, http://www.alleged.demon.co.uk/caption/c2001/

PRODUCTION LINES

COMICS 2 FILM UPDATE

Nic Cage: Hero for Hire

WHAT is it with Nicolas Cage? Not content with being one of Hollywood's most sought after actors – an Oscar-winning sex symbol with millions of adoring fans – he continues to pursue that ridiculous dream most self-respecting comics fans have grown out of by the age of 10. He still wants to be a superhero.

It has to be said there are easier career paths for a 37-year-old man to follow. While some have it relatively easy – born with mutant genes or gain outlandish powers from freak accidents in the school lab – most have to struggle against the odds. They spend years honing their muscles and sharpening their wits in order to earn their spandex. Cage wasn't lucky enough to get bitten by a radioactive casting agent, so had to pursue his comic-book roles through hard work and ruthless dedication. Bruce Wayne would be proud of him.

Of course Tinsel Town has no shortage of superstar comic fans eager to portray their childhood heroes. Wesley Snipes has wanted to portray The Black Panther for years, while Daredevil fan Matt Damon would poke his own eyes out to play the Man without Fear. Compared to Cage, though, they're positively half-arsed. He wouldn't pin his hopes on just one superhero. He wants to play them all.

What accounts for this strange costumed compulsion? His childhood provides us with some insight. A comics fan from an early age, he'd deter school bullies by ripping open his shirt and roaring like The Hulk. The obvious clue is in the name. Born Nicholas Coppola – nephew of illustrious director Francis Ford Coppola – he ditched his natural surname to avoid being perceived as "some nepotistic asshole" and swiped his stage moniker from Marvel's funky chain-belt wearing Hero-for-Hire, Luke Cage. This, incidentally, provides a watertight argument against those who dismiss comics as a lesser art. If Young Cage was into French Impressionism, we might have ended up with "Nicolas Degas in *Leaving Las Vegas*".

For several years, however, Cage's true potential remained dormant. His early career was characterised by a string of offbeat roles in cult movies like *Rumblefish*, *Raising Arizona* and *Wild At Heart*, and during this period he wisely kept silent about the superhero stuff, probably for fear of upsetting David Lynch. It wasn't until the 1990s – when he reinvented himself as a mainstream action hero – that the time had come to fulfil his destiny. Since then his name has been linked to more superheroes than Rick Jones.

After completing the aforementioned *Leaving Las Vegas*, Cage was ready to tackle his first comicbook role, *Iron Man*. With hindsight, it's now obvious that his previous Oscar-winning performance as a self-destructive alcoholic was motivated by a desire to play a tin-clad boozer who'd suck the whiskey from a wounded man's leg.

However, like many other comics2film projects, shell-head's big screen outing ended up in development hell. A lesser Hollywood fanboy might have given up at this point, but not Cage. This setback only encouraged him to aim higher.

With TV's *Lois & Clark* a ratings success at the time, Warner Brothers were looking to revive the Superman movie franchise. Hot on the heels of DC Comics much-publicised Doomsday saga, Superman Reborn was to deal with the death and totally unexpected rebirth of the Man of Steel. When Cage's name became attached to the project, many assumed he was fishing for the role of Lex Luthor. They were wrong: Cage had no intention of shaving off what was left of his hair. It was the cape he was after.

Nic Cage's Superman. Sounds a bit like Harvey Keitel's Shazam! or Ronnie Corbett's Galactus. Five years later and it still seems like a profoundly dumb idea. Back then there was an uproar – the world it seems wasn't ready for a Slap-headed Supes. Even the film's director, Tim Burton – a man known for his idiosyncratic casting decisions – allegedly had a fit of the giggles when he saw Cage in costume, and begged him to wear a wig.

Still, you've got to hand it to Cage for trying. Scripts were scrapped and Burton quit but Cage stuck it out to the bitter end, only throwing in the towel last year. Since then his name has been linked to numerous superhero projects including Batman, Lobo and Hard Boiled.

Finally, it looks as though Cage's graft is about to pay off. In a recent interview in **Empire** magazine, Hollywood veteran Jon Voight – star of *Deliverance* and producer of the forthcoming *Ghost Rider* movie – confirmed that Cage is going to play old Zippo-skull himself, Johnny Blaze.

At least this time he won't need a wig.

Tom Lemon

THE TALE OF ONE NICE BLOKE!

Jo Watt really gets under the skin of one of UK's comics' "legends", Bryan Talbot, in one of his most indepth interviews ever ...

Bryan Talbot 1999

WITH the release of the *Heart of Empire* CD-Rom by Dark Horse imminent, Borderline (no strangers to experimenting with new media) sent Jo Watt to meet Bryan Talbot. In a wide-ranging interview covering the past, present and future, Bryan speaks about everything from his plans for Luther Arkwright to the anti-social habits of seagulls!

BL: Starting with the most obvious question: did you always want to go into comics?

BT: After being given some copies of Giles annuals (political and topical cartoons) when I was five, I had it in my mind that I'd like to be a cartoonist. Though I'd always read comics, and even made my own, it hadn't occurred to me that I could make a living doing them.

BL: How did you originally start in comics?

BT: Through being unemployed. I did graphic design at college (if I'd known I was going to end up drawing comics I'd have done an illustration course) and had started drawing an underground comic in my spare time, just for a laugh. I was a big fan of undergrounds. After finishing the course and after being unemployed for about 6 months I decided to finish the story, which ended up being the first issue of **Brainstorm Comix.**

BL: Was it a difficult field to break into?

BT: Not for me. A couple of years earlier I'd met Lee Harris, owner of the Portobello Road store Alchemy (it's still there!) and occasional publisher, and shown him some of the pages I'd done. He told me that if I ever finished the comic, he would publish it, which he did. It was as simple as that. I then wrote and drew underground and small press comics for the next 5 years. What was harder was breaking into mainstream comics and actually making some money – I was married with two kids and we lived in poverty for most of this time.

BL: So, when you were starting out, what else were you doing to support your family?

BT: In the early 80s I was offered some teaching work at a local college, completely out of the blue. It was only a few hours a week, teaching graphic design, but it gave me something to fall back on if illustration work dried up, enabling me to go self employed. After about 5 years I packed it in to do comics work full time as there was more coming in and I couldn't do both jobs at once. I was still there when I did the first **Nemesis** book and some of the inking was done in college, while the students were working on their projects!

BL: And eventually the comics started making you some money?

BT: At the beginning of the 80s I started to get offered paying work. A London postermag publisher got in touch and for about a year I did a lot of work for them – mainly Adam Ant stuff, illos and airbrushed logos mostly. At the height of his popularity, you could go into any newsagent in the country and I'd have work in there. Then Alan Moore quit his *The Stars my Degradation* strip in the rock newspaper **Sounds** and he recommended me as a replacement. I wrote and drew *Scumworld*, a weekly half-page Underground SF strip for over a year till the editor moved on to **KERRANG!** (heavy metal mag) and took the strip out with the intention of running it there instead. After a few weeks, his bosses decided that the strip was "too heavy for **KERRANG!**" and dropped it. This was a bit much as I'd been instructed to make the strip as near to the knuckle as possible without them getting busted.

*BL: Was it **2000AD** or Luther Arkwright that got you into the mainstream?*

BT: Arkwright got me into **2000AD**, which *was* the mainstream. Pat Mills was a fan of the early Arkwright stories that appeared in **Near Myths** from 1978 -80. I first met him in the early '80s at a Society of Strip Illustrators meeting in London where he told me this and said he wanted to develop a (what we'd now call) steam punk story inspired by Arkwright for **2000AD** and would I be interested in drawing it? Now, the way Pat worked very often was that as he developed a concept, he'd be inspired by the back story to such an extent that it would become the first one or two stories, which is what happened with Nemesis. He created the character with Kev O'Neill, who drew the first two books. I was brought in on the third book, *The Gothic Empire*, which was the story originally inspired by Arkwright, when Kev started working for Stateside publishers.

*BL: And speaking of Luther Arkwright, how did the character and script evolve from its early appearances to **The Adventures of Luther Arkwright**?*

BT: The original strip, *The Papist Affair* (which was recently reprinted in the Brainstorm collection) was an excuse to do a Richard-Corben-type strip in line and watercolour wash, its story very influenced by the Jerry Cornelius books by Michael Moorcock. After doing this seven-page strip, I started to think more seriously about Luther and his milieu, and developed it away from the Cornelius influence, so he took on his own character. I've discussed this since with Moorcock who agrees that the character and stories are very different. He originally introduced Cornelius as a sort of hero template with the intention that other writers could use him as a story vehicle.

The Adventures of Luther Arkwright was an attempt to do an intelligent adventure story for adults that was every bit as rich as a text novel and was drawn in illustration-quality artwork, not in the American "shorthand" style then employed by most comic artists.

It was also a reaction against the bland state of mainstream superhero comics of the time; Arkwright had sex, drugs, swore, vomited etc., – sounds inane now but, at the time, these were shocking things to see in comics. I thought "mainstream text novels and movies contain all this stuff – why not comicbooks?" It was an attempt to take the Underground ethos into the mainstream – something that Alan Moore later did so brilliantly.

On the story level I also wanted to get away from the mainstream formulaic story; I wanted to create a story that was complex and multi-layered, one that had real depth, one that dealt with politics, religion, sex, philosophy – stuff that adults were into but was totally lacking in mainstream comics at this

time (1978) – but was also a cracking good adventure. It's hard to imagine now, with books like **Hellblazer** and co. around for years, but I think Arkwright was one of the first comicbooks to use "real" magic, genuine occult material, as opposed to fantasy hocus-pocus.

BL: Looking back, how do you feel your style evolved over the years?

BT: It's been through many changes. The UG stuff was an attempt to synthesise American UG styles and turn-of-the-century book illustration, Arkwright was influenced by Moebius and William Hogarth and the last two *Nemesis* books a little by Brian Bolland's linework. I consider the UG and early Arkwright work to be my apprenticeship and am still embarrassed by most of it. Some comic artists arrive on the scene completely proficient but then seem to stick with that style for the rest of their working lives. I'm a slow learner but hope that I'm getting better all the time. The anatomy in my earlier comics is really shaky and often the pictures were over-rendered.

Over the last ten years I've moved more into a ligne claire style, using a bold outline with shading and texture done in colour. I suppose this is a more confident style as the drawing needs to be fundamentally sound – this style shows up the slightest fault very clearly. Usually I "create on the page", making up characters and scenes, which is perfectly acceptable, I think, for fantasy-based or superhero comics. With **Bad Rat**, because of the nature of the story, to root it in reality, I decided to use life models for all the main characters and based scenes on real locations. For **Heart of Empire** I used a more cartoony style, using invented characters but staying with the **Bad Rat** inking style, though with a lot more detail. I always let the story dictate the style, though I've been told that no matter what style I adopt, it's always recognisably my work.

Bryan Talbot (right), with his Webmaster, James Robertson (left) and dressed in full Heart of Empire gear is Elaine Mace, one of the UK convention scene's good sports!

*BL: What inspires you to write? For example, **The Tale of One Bad Rat** is an obvious labour of love but what inspired you onto that particular topic?*

BT: I didn't set out to write a story about child abuse. This was a definite case of the story developing itself, completely going in its own direction, with me following in wonder behind. I originally set out to write a story about the English Lake District. This lead me on to Beatrix Potter, children's author and one of the first members and benefactors of the National Trust. I'd never been into Potter when young and had to research her life and stories. There's no evidence that she was sexually abused – not the sort of thing that was discussed in Victorian times – but she was certainly emotionally abused by her parents. It was after seeing a painfully shy teenage girl (similar to Potter at age 16) begging in Tottenham Court Road tube station that I came up with the concept of an abused runaway girl travelling to the Lakes, a girl with an undefined link with Beatrix Potter (synchronicity? reincarnation? magic? I left it to the reader) that leads to her own fulfilment. The story was loosely plotted; it was while I was doing the research and after talking to abuse survivors that I realised that I couldn't simply have child abuse as a McGuffin, a mere plot device: it had to be what the story was ABOUT.

BL: What particularly drew you to writing about the Lake District?

BT: My folks have had a caravan there since I was about 14 and all our holidays and most weekends were spent there. I love the place and feel more at home in the Winster valley than anywhere else on Earth. I'd spend days on my own, roaming the woods and fells and always thought that it would be a wonderful backdrop to a story. The pub that Helen ends up in, the valley outside, the village, the church and the barrow are all exactly as portrayed in **Bad Rat**. Last year James Robertson, who does my website, and his wife-to-be spent a "Bad Rat holiday" walking round the locations. This tiny rural pub, by the way – **The Mason's Arms** – was the first place that I used to regularly drink, when I was 14. Then it used to be me and a couple of shepherds, smoking their pipes and playing dominos.

It's still a great place but now it's a total tourist trap.

*BL: You had problems getting **Bad Rat** published initially. What was the turning point?*

BT: The problem was only the result of my naivety in thinking that, because it was a non-genre, mainstream story, book publishers would be interested. I sent copies of the proposal to every British publisher of illustrated books, most of whom immediately returned them, obviously unread (the pages still pressed together). As soon as they'd seen the word "comic" in the covering letter, bang, back it came.

There were three or four comics publishers interested in the project and I

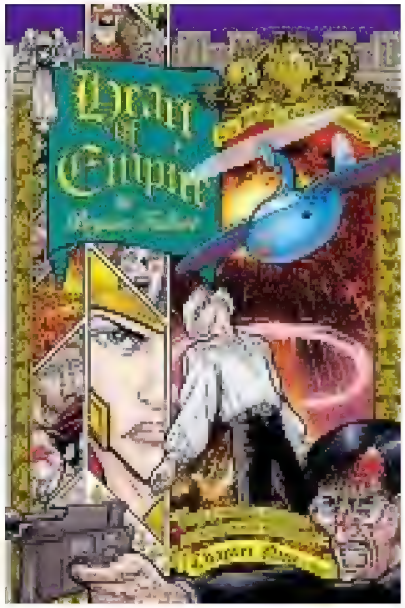
went to the Alexandra Palace convention in North London with the specific mission to decide which one to go with. Tundra was just starting then and Dave Elliot, the head of their British department, wanted to do it. Entering the building, it seemed as if everybody there had something being published by Tundra. They were throwing money away. I realised that **Bad Rat** would be completely swamped, lost in the huge number of books they were intending to churn out. I already had a good relationship with Dark Horse – they'd already published Arkwright in comic form – so I went with them.

BL: Is there anyone in particular you would like to work with in the future, or again?

BT: Alan Moore immediately springs to mind. I've drawn several short strips by him in the past and we were working on a graphic novel, *Nightjar*, to be serialised in **Warrior**, before he and Dez Skinn fell out and it was shelved. He later recycled the concept – an urban sorcerer – into what became John Constantine.

BL:. What were the similarities and differences between Nightjar and John Constantine?

BT: For a start, the protagonist, Mirrigen



Top & bottom: Cover images from the Dark Horse published ***Heart of Empire****. Opposite: Chester Hackerbush makes a reappearance in a 1999 advert for Brainstorm Comix*

Demdike (named by me after one of the Pendle witches of the 17th century) was a woman. It was the concept – that of a magician living in the real world and based upon real occult lore – that carried over into Constantine. You have to remember that in comics of the time, magicians wore silly costumes (and usually fishnet tights, if they were female) and spouted invented "magic" gibberish. *Nightjar* was influenced by contemporary horror fiction – that of Peter Straub and Ramsey Campbell – carrying concepts that were years ahead of comicbook equivalents. Alan and I went around the main Pendle locations, making notes and taking reference photos. Pendle is a great backdrop for a horror story: besides its history of witch hunts, it's just a strange, beautiful but creepy place – a grim, dark, looming hill, just 100 feet short of being classed as a mountain. We also visited Lancaster and found the house where she would be living in the story. Strangely enough, in the very first chapter, Mirrigen's grandmother spontaneously combusts in a magical suicide/ rebirth scene, burning down her small terraced house in the process. This was set in a tiny old village called Fence, in the shadow of Pendle. A couple of days after I received the first script from Alan, the local radio news reported a house being burned down in Fence, killing the old woman who lived there!

I'm going to be working with Alan on a special for his ABC series when he gets enough time to write it in his incredibly busy schedule.

BL: Could you give us a hint what the special will be about?

BT: Like other of his ABC titles, it's a fresh take on a classic superhero archetype. I think that's all I can say till it's in the works. I'll keep you informed. I may be doing another **Dead Boy Detectives** miniseries with Ed Brubaker next year, which would be fun, if I'm not completely tied up with another bloody epic of my own by then.

BL: There's another epic imminent?

BT: I'm not sure. I'm developing a few things – one of which being another Arkwright story that I'll start, hopefully, in a couple of years. Another is a completely new work that I'd like to do first. It's hard to say – I keep getting offered jobs that pay immediate money and, being self employed, I find them hard to turn down and tend to take them whereas my own projects usually take up a lot of unpaid time while I develop them into a form that I can take to a publisher. I've just done a two page splash for **Flash Secret Files**, of all things, just because I was asked nicely, and I'm currently drawing a frontispiece for a Dr Who novel by Kim Newman. Having said that, I do turn lots of things down – I'm not a complete comics slapper.

BL: Going back to ***Dead Boy Detectives*** *for a moment: you usually ink your own work, but you've teamed up with Steve Leialoha on this series. Is there a reason for that?*

BT: Time, mainly. If I'd been inking it, it would have taken twice as long. I finished the pencils over a month ago and Steve, who's done a great job, is only just finishing #4 now.

BL: And how difficult is it to work with an inker rather than inking your own pencils?

BT: It means that I do have to spend more time on the pencils because they have to be much tighter and completely unambiguous. I also dot the pages with little notes and suggestions to Steve.

BL: Is it odd to be working with ***Sandman*** *characters in* ***Dead Boy Detectives*** *with a different writer?*

BT: Not at all. I never actually drew the boys, Mad Hettie or Hob in the original series anyway so there was no discrepancy. Ed Brubaker's been great to work with and has accepted all my suggestions and script changes.

BL: Do you have any plans for Victoria or any of the other new characters in ***Heart of Empire****?*

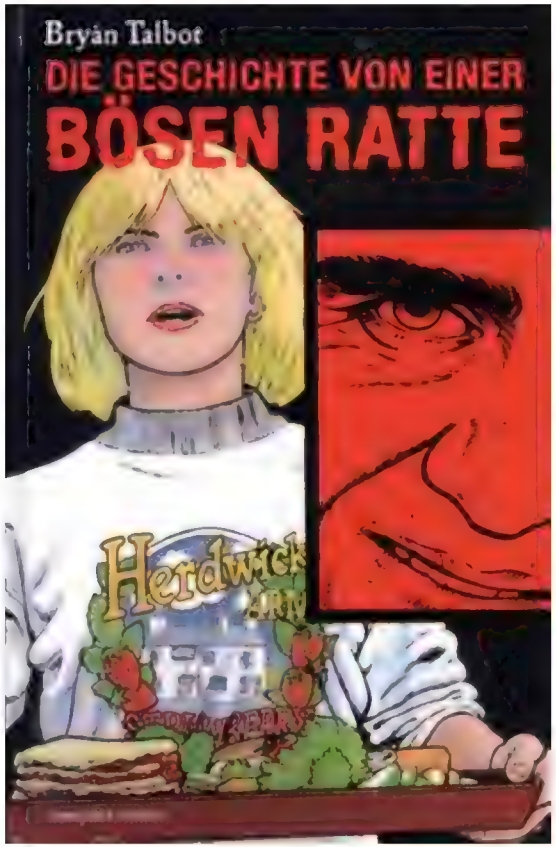
BT: Not sure at the moment. My current feeling is that it's best to leave Victoria, as we did at the end of **Heart of Empire**, flying off the page and into the imagination. The next story will concentrate on Arkwright. I do feel tempted to keep on Fairfax and Nelly Winterton, though.

BL: How involved are you in the website?

BT: James Robertson does all the work. He approached me quite a few years ago and volunteered to do my "official" fan site. He's done a terrific job, which is why we're working on the *Heart of Empire CD-Rom* together. All I do is supply James with news about signings, new work, etc and email him images from time to time that he can put in the galleries.

BL: Tell me all about the CD-Rom. When is it out? What "extras" will it have? How long has producing it taken you? Is this a new idea? Will you be doing CD-Roms of any other work?

BT: It's taken me far too long. I've been working on it on and off, between paying jobs, for about a year and a half now – probably for a total of 3 or 4 months all added together. That's not just the writing, but also sorting out and scanning images, researching stuff, correcting various versions, etc. But it was worth it. It'll be a unique record of the creation of a graphic novel, through all its stages. It's also a really great opportunity to be able to express and document my thoughts on comics storytelling and lots of other things, in one place. It's not an academic work, it's written to be entertaining and is aimed at comics readers who want an insight into the creative process. The CD-Rom's starting point is the old question that's inevitably asked on panels at conventions: "where do you get your wacky and zany ideas from?" There are well over 60,000 words of



commentary on every aspect of the comic. There's mini-essays on topics as varied as The Golden Section, the sex life of Charles II, William Blake or Famous Farters. There're jokes and anecdotes and, I hope, humorous tirades.

There're pieces on the use of eye level, colour and composition, a stripography and a gallery. For almost all of the 284 pages you can see the pencilled, inked and coloured (both screen-sized and high-resolution) versions of the pages, going from one to the other or forwards or backwards with one click of the mouse, or to the annotations for that page. You can go through in order, or straight to whatever version of that page you like. James has done a brilliant job in making it as user-friendly as humanly possible – you can zip through the disc to any part with ease. Apparently there are over 100,000 internal links on the disc, not to mention many external ones. There're lots of additional illos – sketches, thumbnails and reference pictures – for example, in the Bedlam sequence, you'll be able to click and see the 18th century Hogarth print that inspired it. There's also a sizable introduction, an annotated back cover gallery, illustrated biographies of everybody involved in the production, three interviews and a full, clickable index to all the annotations. Everything is completely interlinked. Oh yeah - there's also the entirety of **The Adventures of Luther Arkwright** on there too. It's amazing how much information these discs will hold.

Hmm – enough of the sales spiel, got carried away there! We'll be putting the finishing touches to it this week and it should be on sale in about 2 or 3 months from Dark Horse. I don't have any more CD-Roms planned but you never know. We'll see how this goes.

BL: Has the website changed how you relate to your fans, or how they relate to you?

BT: Not really. Now it's easier for them to contact me or see where I'll be appearing. I've had quite a few pieces of work and useful contacts through the site. By the way, after we finish work on the CD we'll be reworking the site, vamping it up and adding new stuff. One reviewer said that the site was great but had "too much on it" – "bollocks", we said. We want the site to be a massive archive of information and images and will be constantly updating and enlarging it.

BL: Any hints on where you plan to take Luther next, then?

BT: Well, no... it's at that delicious moment right now, the bit where I have an idea, an atmosphere, a milieu where anything can happen, the bit where everything is in freefall in the imagination and I can surprise myself by coming up with things I didn't foresee. Also, everyday events feed into the process. Like with the other story I mentioned – the one I'd like to do next, a lo-tech fantasy which has the working title of **City** – just today I thought of something that throws a completely new light on it.

About two weeks ago a herring-gull chick fell out of the nest that's on the chimney of my house and landed in the garden. In case you don't know, herring gulls are massive, rapacious scavengers – the pit bulls of the seagull world. I've been keeping and feeding the vicious little bugger – otherwise it would be dead. It's just become a major character in the story!

*BL: Is there any chance of you telling me anymore about **City** or is it too much at a conceptual stage?*

BT: Don't really want to talk about the story so far in advance of publication – not even started scripting it yet, never mind finding a publisher. I *have* been making copious notes and have been designing the city from the ground up, the layout, the architecture, the social structure, the religion, etc. After **Heart of Empire**, which needed exhaustive research for the buildings, furniture, everything in fact, I want to do a story where everything's completely invented on the page. Having said that, there's still some research I'll have to do, e.g., I need to visit a windmill and a watermill to make sketches and take reference photos of their internal workings.

*BL: Why did **Heart of Empire** need such extensive research?*

BT: I just wanted it to be so visually rich but also authentic. I didn't want the architecture, costumes, furniture, etc. to look spurious and fudged. This sort of detail suited the story. I did a lot of research for **Heart of Empire** – in Rome, the Louvre, the British Museum, Windsor Castle, York Museum, The Metropolitan in New York and other places. Looking round these places always fires off my imagination which, obviously, is essential when you're creating any stories, not just those to do

with parallel histories.

*BL: You mentioned that your style had evolved from **Luther Arkwright** to **Heart of Empire**, but why did the sequel take so long?*

BT: Not sure, really. Originally I didn't feel the need to do a sequel, but it grew on me. I did have the basic premise before I came up with **Bad Rat**, but wanted to do that first. And there was a lot of commercial work I'd chosen to do, illustrating other people's scripts. I think that I thought that the time was right.

BL: Do you feel that you're more in touch with your fans than other writers and artists are?

BT: I've no idea, but the tendency is the bigger the name, the more distance is kept. I always reply to fan mail and have become great friends with many long term fans. I'm also in touch with other creators – comics writers and artists, novelists. I've made a lot of friends in this business and we're always emailing, phoning or spending time propping up the bar or going for dinner with each other at cons or comic festivals. Just been with Dave McKean at the Mallorca festival and Dave Gibbons and others in Bristol. And there's always lots of visitors. When Jeff Smith wanted to take a break to chill out, he came over and stopped here for a week. Jeff always has time for his fans and I try and do likewise.

BL: Your son seems to be following you into the business – what's he doing at the moment?

BT: I presume you mean Alwyn, my youngest, who drew the **Armageddon Patrol** comics? It's a couple of years now since he finished his Illustration BA and, though he's done several commercial jobs such as a couple of strips for Paradox's **Big Books**, he had to get a day job working in a shop. That's changed now, as he's just landed a full time job doing animation for Nintendo which, I think, is a good stepping stone to a future animation career. Since he was five he's been making flip books and has worked in animation a little. I always encouraged him in this and tried to dissuade him from trying to make a living in comics – it's just a hard business to make money in, especially over the last few years. My eldest, Robyn, works for the DHSS but has always drawn comics as a hobby. I guess that when you grow up with your father scribbling away at a drawing board all day, you presume that's what grown-ups do. However he and our mutual friend Ben (**Vogarth**) Hunt have just self-published the first two issues of their **Classic Comix**, full of comic and SF parodies, which I think is brilliant. Much funnier than **VIZ**. My favourite strip in there is the Thor take-off *The Impressive Bjeard* (sic). He's the Norse god of yodelling and drizzle. They're just working on the third one now, which will be a horror issue.

BL: Do you have any other up and coming projects we can mention?

BT: I've been trying to get an animation project off the ground for over a year now, a supernatural comedy-adventure called *Cherubs*! My current thinking is that I should probably do it as a comicbook first – perhaps with me just scripting it. Wanted: a hot young cartoonist (preferably American, as the story's set in New York) with a killer sense of humour. Apply through this organ or my website.

I've also done a movie treatment – I came up with a story that just seemed more suitable as a British film rather than a comic. I've already had interest from Richard (*Rocky Horror*) O'Brien and Si (*Eastenders*) Spencer is interested in co-scripting but I seem to have come to a halt; I know nothing about the workings of the film industry and don't know what to do to get it noticed by a producer. Can anybody out there help?

In September Hogshead, the people who publish **Warhammer**, are bringing out **Nobilis** – a sophisticated RPG that mainly involves storytelling. I've four illos in there. And on August 16th Gwyneth Jones' new novel **Bold as Love** is published by Gollancz. I did an Arts & Crafts, William Morris-style frontispiece, complete with a border showing eglantine flowers and thorny branches, interwoven with guitars and machine guns. I've done quite a bit of illustration work over the last year, but these are the ones I'm most pleased with.

An "audio-drama" (that's "radio play" to you) company has approached me about doing an adaptation of **The Adventures of Luther Arkwright**, which I would be writing, but I'll believe it when I hear it.

BL: Purely for my own curiosity, what is the psycho herring gull called?

BT: I've just been referring to it as "da boid". Nearly called it Terry though, as it makes a noise like a pterodactyl in a Ray Harryhausen movie.

For such a dumb, aggressive bastard, it's quite cute. When I'm feeding it I go into the garden and say "Woys dat boid?" and, no matter where it is, is walks right up to me and stands there while I drop bits of fish into its mouth. I've even trained it to catch stuff I throw in the air.

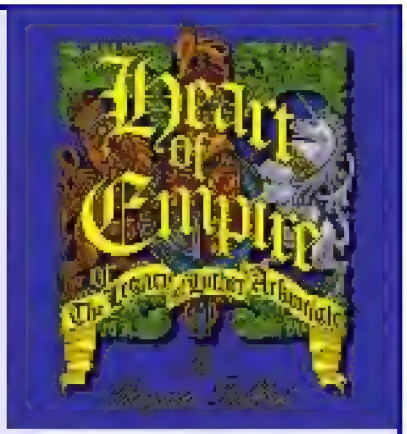
*Bryan Talbot's **Heart of Empire CD-Rom** will be published by Dark Horse and is solicited in the late July issue of **Diamond Previews**.*

For a unique preview of Bryan's annotations from the CD-ROM, visit www.rinthart.com

*For further information on Robyn Talbot and Ben Hurt's **Classic Comix**, e-mail Ben Hurt at: Ben@vogarth.freeserve.co.uk.*

Heart of Empire CD-ROM

A Borderline exclusive preview!



IN many cases a project such as this – an exhaustive annotation of a comic's contents, techniques, methods of construction and influences – might seem an act of monumental hubris. Why should anyone want to know all this background stuff? Who cares about the artist's ideas and motivations? Shouldn't the work stand or fall on the merits it presents to the otherwise uninformed reader?

In many cases these may be valid questions. But when the comics in question are Bryan Talbot's **Luther Arkwright** epics, their validity fades into insignificance. Even the casual reader – if there is such thing – of these stories can hardly help noticing the wealth of cultural reference and allusion with which each page of them is loaded, and dedicated readers can hardly have failed to wonder just how many of those allusions and references they're missing. For while it is never allowed to intrude upon the clarity of the narrative, the density of reference is both enormous and essential, contributing immeasurably to the sense of richness, of depth, evoked by a Talbot comic – and so a missed reference is a depth left unplumbed.

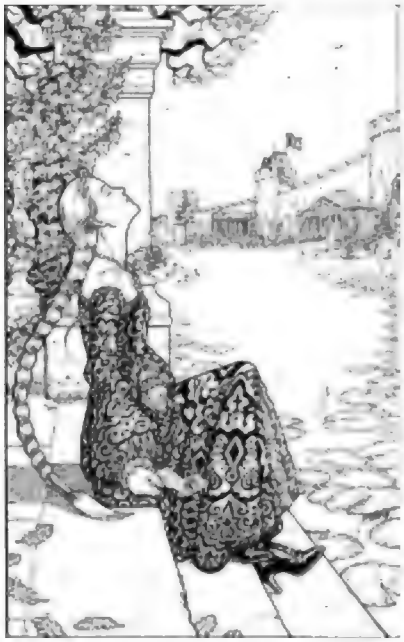
The purpose of this CD-Rom is to guide the reader through Bryan's maze of allusion, enlightening and entertaining along the way. The guides are both of the Arkwright stories, presented in their entirety but intended to serve as indices rather than primary reading matter: read the comics first, then come here to find out just who exactly those people were in that panel, or how a fictional scenario reflects a real historical event. Or just to look at the high resolution scans of **Heart of Empire** and wallow in the precision and glow with which Angus McKie's remarkable colours enhance the clear-lined detail of the art: with these you can both look and learn.

The disc is very easily navigated, doing credit to the skill with which programmer James Robertson has put it together: even the user who chooses to wander through it following any link which takes their fancy can never end up more than a few simple, well signposted steps from where they started. That's a good job, since following one's whims through this disc may even be the most rewarding way of experiencing it: there's much in Arkwright that demands the lateral more than the linear.

Ultimately this is not a package for tyros but for the dedicated reader; that, and Bryan's insistence on not annotating *everything* for fear of being dull, may be its most marked limitation. Admirers of the Arkwright story, though, should not hesitate to acquire a copy of this disc when it is published by Dark Horse this autumn – it'll keep you enthralled and entertained for a very long time, and no doubt add to your admiration. *Mike Kidson*

The Bryan Talbot Stripography

...does not include covers, illustrated stories or single illustrations. All strips written, pencilled and inked by Bryan unless otherwise stated. Only short strips have page counts and foreign language reprints are omitted. Strips are in black and white unless colouring is indicated. For more information on Bryan Talbot, go to **www.bryan-talbot.com** *and use the easy to follow links.*



Superharris (Ongoing jam with Bonk in **Hac**, Harris College (aka Preston Polytechnic) student newspaper 1971–1972)

Collected in one self-published litho edition (10 of which had laminated covers!) in 1978 as **Bog Standard Comix**

Chester P Hackenbush, the Psychedelic Alchemist

Out of the Crucible (in **Brainstorm Comix** 1, 1975, **Alchemy**)

From Here to Infinity (in **Brainstorm Comix** 2, 1976, **Alchemy**)

A Streetcar Named Delirium (in **Brainstorm Comix** 4, 1977, **Alchemy**)

All reprinted in one volume in 1982 and in 1999 with added material as **BRAINSTORM! Alchemy**.

The Influence of Hassab-I-Sabbah 1 page (in **Seed** v5/5, 1976)

Reprinted in **Ex-Directory – the Secret Files of Bryan Talbot**, 1997, **Knockabout Comics** and in **BRAINSTORM!** 1999, **Alchemy**,

The Papist Affair 7 pages (in **The Mixed Bunch** 1, 1976, first Luther Arkwright story), **Alchemy**.

Reprinted in **The Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1991**, 1991, **Propaganda Comix** and in **BRAINSTORM!** 1999, **Alchemy**

Komix Comics 2 pages (in **Streetcomix** 3, 1977 **Street Press**)

Reprinted in **Adult Comics** by Roger Sabin, **Routledge** 1993 and in **BRAINSTORM!** 1999 **Alchemy**,

Claude Cloud 1 page, manual seperation colour (in **Brainstorm Comix** 4, 1977 **Alchemy**)

The World Heavyweight Roboxing Championship 3 Pages (jam with Bonk, **Brainstorm Fantasy Comix** 1 1977 **Alchemy**)

Committed 2 pages (in **Kak Comics** 2 1977 **Street Comics**)

Komicsscimok 2 pages(in **Kak Comics** 2 1977 **Street Comics**)

Interlude 1 page (in **Home Grown** 1 1977 **Alchemy**)

Reprinted in **BRAINSTORM!** 1999 **Alchemy**

The Omega Report (in **Amazing Rock'n'Roll Adventures**, **Brainstorm Comix** 6 1978 **Alchemy**)

Reprinted in **BRAINSTORM!** 1999 **Alchemy**,

Luther Arkwright

Serialised in **Near Myths** 1–5 1978–1980 **Galaxy Media** and **Pssst!** 2–10, 1982 **Never Ltd** (reprints **Near Myths** and new material.)

Collected as **The Adventures of Luther Arkwright** Volume 1, 1982 **Never Ltd**. Reprinted with new cover 1987.

For A Few Gallons More 4 page Arkwright and Ogoth the Barbarian strip (jam with Chris Welch, in **Moon Comics** 3, 1979 **Street Comics**)

Reprinted in **Sideshow Comics** 1 1988 **Pan Graphics**

The Fire Opal of Set 2 pages (in **Imagine** 14, 1984 **TSR UK Ltd**)

The Adventures of Luther Arkwright 1–9 **Valkyrie Press**, 1987–1989: reprints **Near Myths** and **Pssst!** plus new material to complete the story: reprinted as **The Adventures of Luther Arkwright** 1–9, **Dark Horse** March 1990–January 1991

Material not in Volume 1, with the exception of **For A Few Gallons More** and **The Fire Opal of Set,** collected in **The Adventures of Luther Arkwright** Volumes 2 1987, **Valkyrie** & Volume 3, 1989, **Proutt**.

The whole reprinted in one volume, **Dark Horse** 1997

Frank Fazakerly, Space Ace of the Future (in **Ad Astra** 1–17 October 1978–September 1981, by BT)

Serialised in **The Manchester Flash**, circa 1983. Reprinted in one volume, **Frank Fazakerly, Space Ace of the Future**, 1991 **Kimota Publishing**

Ghost Train 1 page (in **Comics Plus** 5 1979 **Fanzine**)

Smokey Bears (2 pages, manual seperation colour in **Home Grown** 5 1979, 1 page in 6, 1980, 1 page in 8, 1980, 3 pages in10, 1981/82 **Alchemy**, the last strip reprinted in **Ex-Directory – the Secret Files of Bryan Talbot,** 1997 **Knockabout Comics**)

Spaced out in Amsterdam 3 pages (in **Home Grown** 7, 1980 **Alchemy**)

Reprinted in **Ex-Directory – the Secret Files of Bryan Talbot,** 1997 **Knockabout Comics**

Arnold Gets Cross 4 pages (in **Knockabout Comics** 2 1981 **Knockabout Comics** co-plotted by Rick Jakimowicz)

Reprinted in **Ex-Directory – the Secret Files of Bryan Talbot** 1997, **Knockabout Comics**

The Wages of Sin (in **2000ad,** Prog 257, 1982, **IPC** Written by Alan Moore).

Reprinted in **The Best of 2000ad Monthly** 1986 **Fleetway**, **Alan Moore's Shocking Futures** 1986 **Titan Books** and **Time Twisters** 1987 **Quality**

Ro-Busters: Old Red Eyes is Back 7 pages (in **2000ad Annual** 1983 **IPC** Written by Alan Moore)

Reprinted and crudely re-edited into 5 pages in **The Very Best of 2000ad Special Edition**, circa 1990 **Fleetway**

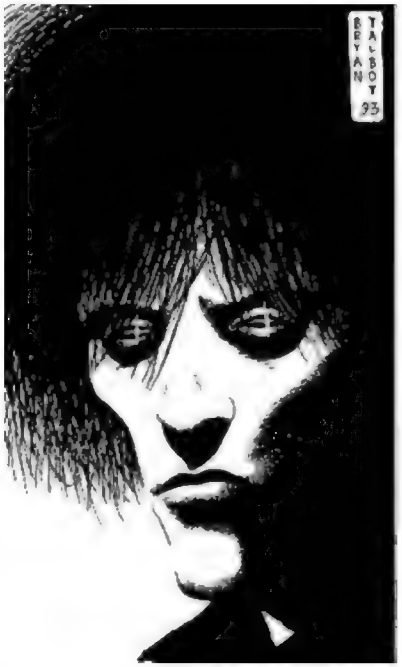
Scumworld (in **Sounds,** weekly 1983–1984 Written by **The Crabs from Uranus** – BT Pseudonym)

Nemesis (written by Pat Mills)

The Gothic Empire (in **2000ad** Prog 389–406 1984–1985, **IPC**)

Reprinted in one Volume as **Nemesis Book 3** 1985 **Titan Books**

The Vengeance of Thoth (in **2000ad** Prog 435–445 1985, **IPC**)



Reprinted in one Volume as **Nemesis Book 4** 1986 **Titan Books**

Torquemurder (in 2000ad Prog 482–487, 500–504, 1986–1987 **IPC**)

Reprinted in one Volume as **Nemesis Book 6** 1987 **Titan Books**

These Nemesis stories were also serialised in **Spellbinders** 1987–88 **Quality Comics** and also reprinted in **The Best of 2000ad Monthly** circa 1989 **Fleetway**

Torquemada: The Garden of Alien Delights 20 pages (in **Diceman** 3, 1986, **IPC**)

Reprinted in **Nemesis Book 7** 1987 **Titan Books**

Cold Snap 4 pages (in **Food for Thought** Ethiopian benefit comic 1985 **Flying Pig Enterprises**, Written by Alan Moore)

Reprinted in **International Times** circa 1987, **Slow Death**, 1992 **Last Gasp** and **Ex-Directory – the Secret Files of Bryan Talbot** 1997 **Knockabout Comics**

Slaine 7 pages (Inks only, in **2000ad** Prog 431 1985 **IPC** Written by Pat Mills, pencils by Glen Fabry)

Nightjar (in **Arkensword** 15, 1985, **Fanzine**. Written by Alan Moore, 1 page of unpublished story)

Judge Dredd

House of Death 20 pages (in **Diceman** 1 1986 **IPC** Written by Pat Mills)

The Last Voyage of the Flying Dutchman 7 pages (in **2000ad** Prog 459 1986 **IPC** Written by Alan Grant & John Wagner)

Reprinted in **Judge Dredd's Rough Justice** 1990 **Titan**

Judge Dredd and the Seven Dwarves 7 pages Fully painted colour (in **Judge Dredd Annual 1987** 1986, **IPC** Written by Alan Grant & John Wagner)

Reprinted in **Judge Dredd's Crime File** 1998 **Titan**

Ladies Night 8 pages, Fully painted colour (in **2000ad** Annual 1987 **IPC** by Alan Grant & John Wagner)

Reprinted in **Judge Dredd's Hardcase Papers 4** 1991 **Fleetway**

Untitled **Judge Dredd** 1 page Fully painted colour (in **Info**. 1992, **Dept. of Trade**: free teenage consumer guide circulated to all the schools in the UK. Written by publisher)

Enemy Alien 4 pages (Inks only, in **2000ad Sci-Fi Special** 1986 **IPC** Written and pencilled by Mike Matthews)

Spill it! 1 page (in **Heartbreak Hotel** 2, 1988 **Willyprods/Small Time Ink**)

Reprinted in **Ex-Directory – the Secret Files of Bryan Talbot**, 1997 **Knockabout Comics**

From Homogenous to Honey 4 pages (in **AARGH!** 1988 **Mad Love,** Written by Neil Gaiman, inks by Mark Buckingham)

Sloth 7 pages (in **Seven Deadly Sins**, 1989, **Knockabout Comics** Written by Neil Gaiman)

Reprinted in **Ex-Directory – the Secret Files of Bryan Talbot**, 1997 **Knockabout Comics**

The Bloody Saint (in **Hellblazer Annual 1**, 1989 **DC Comics**, Written by Jamie Delano, coloured by Lovern Kindzierski)

The Nazz (in the Nazz 1–4, 1990–1991 **DC Comics**, Written by Tom Veitch, coloured by Steve Whittaker (1) and Les Dorscheid (2–4)

Africa 2 pages (in **The Comic Relief Comic**, 1991, **Comic Relief** written by Igor Goldkind, fully rendered colour by Al Davison, benefit comic)

Sandman (Written by Neil Gaiman)

August (in **Sandman** 30, 1991 **DC Comics**, inks by Stan Woch, coloured by Daniel Vozzo)

The Song of Orpheus (in **Sandman Special 1**, 1991 **DC Comics**, inks by Mark Buckingham, coloured by Daniel Vozzo)

Both reprinted in **Fables and Reflections** (Hardback 1993 Trade Paperback 1993 **DC Comics)**

A Game of You: **Over The Sea to Sky** 16 pages (in **Sandman** 36, 1992 **DC Comics**, inks by Stan Woch, coloured by Daniel Vozzo)

Reprinted in **A Game of You** (Hardback 1993 Trade Paperback 1993 **DC Comics)**

Worlds End 34 & 1/2 pages, (framing sequences in **Sandman** 51–56 1993 **DC Comics**, inked by Mark Buckingham (51– 55) and Mark Buckingham, Dick Giordano, BT and Steve Leialoha (56), coloured by Daniel Vozzo)

Reprinted in **Worlds End** (Hardback 1994 Trade Paperback 1994 **DC Comics)**

The Tempest 7 pages (in Sandman 75, 1996 **DC Comics**, inked by Charles Vess, coloured by Daniel Vozzo)

Reprinted in **The Wake** (Hardback 1997 Trade Paperback 1997 **DC Comics)**

NB: In the case of **A Game of You** and **The Tempest,** Bryan was called in for pencilling chores at the last minute to meet deadlines, hence the small page count.

All the above **Sandman** stories have since been re–issued in a set of standard format trade paperback editions and also as individual comics in the **Essential Vertigo** series by **DC Comics**.

Shade the Changing Man: The Sante Fe Trail (in **Shade the Changing Man** 14, August 1991 **DC Comics** Written by Peter Milligan, inks by Mark Pennington, coloured by Daniel Vozzo)

Brainworms 10 pages, fully painted colour (in **Xpresso Special** 2, December 1991 **Fleetway** Written by Matthias Scultheiss)

Mask in **Legends of the Dark Knight** 39–40, 1992 **DC Comics** Coloured by Olyoptics)

Reprinted in **Dark Legends** 1996 **DC Comics** (US) **Titan Books** (UK)

Celtic Warrior 4 pages (in **Dark Horse Presents**, 1994 **Dark Horse Comics** Written by Lucy Swan)

Reprinted in **Ex-Directory – the Secret Files of Bryan Talbot,** 1997 **Knockabout Comics**

An Honest Answer 4 pages (in the UK SF **Eastercon** souvenir booklet 1995 Written by Neil Gaiman)

Reprinted in **Ex–Directory – the Secret Files of Bryan Talbot,** 1997 **Knockabout Comics** and **Unknown Quantities**, benefit comic by **Funny Valentine Press** (US) 2000.

Evolution 2 pages (in the UK SF **Eastercon** souvenir booklet 1996)

Reprinted in **Ex–Directory – the Secret Files of Bryan Talbot,** 1997 **Knockabout Comics**

The Tale of One Bad Rat 1–4, Fully painted colour (1994–1995, **Dark Horse Comics**.)

Trade Paperback edition (1995 **Dark Horse Comics** (US) **Titan Books** (UK)

Limited Edition Hardback (1996 **Dark Horse Comics**)

Teknophage

Neil Gaiman's Mr Hero 1, 6 pages pencils and inks (1995, **Tekno Comix** Written by Rick Veitch, coloured by Angus McKie)

Neil Gaiman's Mr Hero 2, 5 pages, inked by Angus McKie (1995, **Tekno Comix** Written by Rick Veitch, coloured by Angus McKie)

Neil Gaiman's Wheel of Worlds One shot, 11 pages (1995, **Tekno Comix** Written by Rick Veitch, coloured by Angus McKie)

Neil Gaiman's Teknophage 1 –6 (1995–1996, **Tekno Comix** Written by Rick Veitch, inked and coloured by Angus McKie #6 inked by John Coulthart)

ShadowDeath 1–6 (1996, **Tekno Comix** Written by BT, pencilled by David Pugh, inked by Tim Perkins, coloured by Angus McKie)

Big Books

The Cannabis Conspiracy (in **The Big Book of Conspiracies** 1995, **Paradox Press** Written by Doug Moench)

Reprinted in **Tales of Reefer Madness**, 1999 **Zephyr** (unauthorised bootleg)

The Ten–in–One (in **The Big book of Freaks** 1996, **Paradox Press** Written by Ricky Jay)

Sore Losers (in **The Big Book of Losers**1997, **Paradox Press** Written by Paul Kirchner)

The King and Mrs Simpson (in **The Big Book of Scandal** 1997, **Paradox Press** Written by Jonathan Vankin)

Weird Romance (in **The Dreaming** 9–12, 1997 **DC Comics**, Written by BT, pencilled and inked by Dave Taylor (9) and pencilled by Peter Dougherty, inked by Tayyar Ozkan (10 –12), coloured by Daniel Vozzo)

The Worm (Trade Paperback version of **The Longest Comic Strip in the World** charity project, 2 panels, 1999, **Slab O' Concrete**, Written by Alan Moore and others and drawn by "a galaxy of greats")

Heart of Empire, or the Legacy of Luther Arkwright 1–9, (1999, **Dark Horse Comics** coloured by Angus McKie)

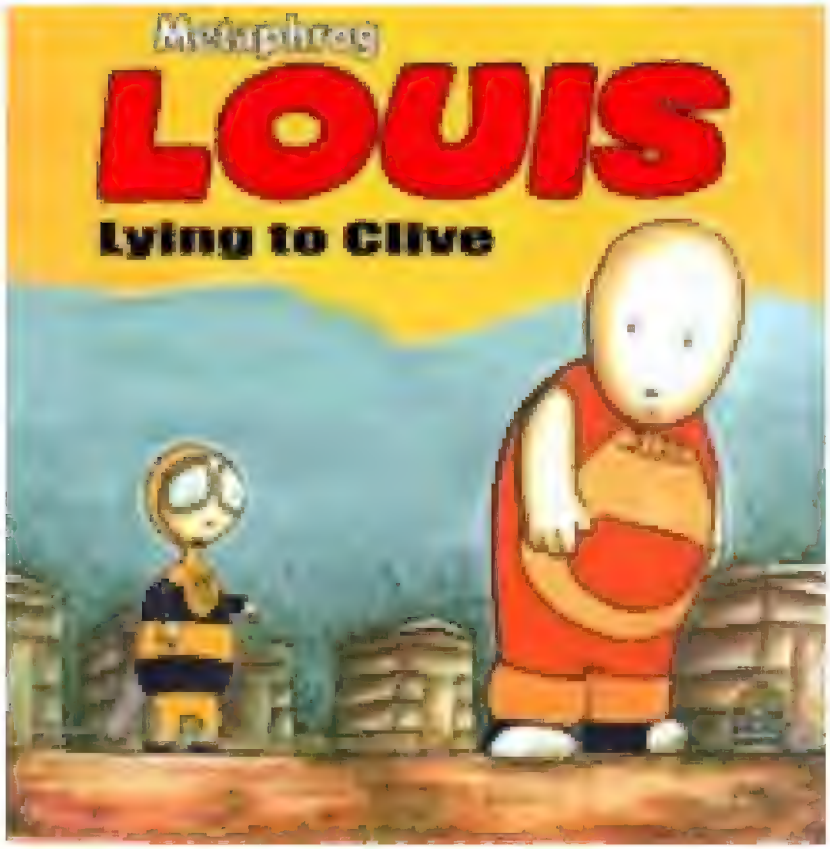
Trade Paperback edition (2001 **Dark Horse Comics**)

Limited Edition Hardback (2001 **Dark Horse Comics**)

Sire 4 pages, Fully painted colour (in **Vampires**, 2001, **Editions Carabas** (France) Written by Jérôme Martineau)

The Dead Boy Detectives and the Secret of Immortality 1–4 (2001, **DC Comics** Written by Ed Brubaker, inked by Steve Leialoha, coloured by Daniel Vozzo)

***Images**: Heart of Empire – Victoria*
Bryan's own pet rat
Sandman/Morpheus
Luther Ascending
G-Man (unpublished with Pat Mills)



MAKING SOMETHING MEANINGFUL

Metaphrog thought they could storm the comics industry with their eclectic mix of hard hitting stories and whimsical, almost child-like fantasy. Guess what? They appear to be succeeding as *Louis: Lying to Clive* is about to go stellar!

Adrian Brown gets the lowdown on how it all turned sweet for the Franco-Scottish duo...

THEY employ such a diversity of styles that they have been mistaken for an art collective.

In fact, Metaphrog are Sandra Marrs (art) and John Chalmers (words) from Glasgow.

Sandra is the artist, originating in France, who brings the scenes to life with an eye for background detail. John is the scientist, that is to say he has qualifications in physics. Perhaps this is why the stories have such crystalline structures?

The Metaphrog publication history has confounded the customary attempts by comics fans to pigeon-hole the work into genres. In 1995 Metaphrog began to work on **Strange Weather Lately**, an A4 comic: "Five short comic stories from the surreal yet unnervingly real world of Martin Nitram".

Next came **The Maze**. With that title you might have expected it to be as convoluted as its predecessor. In fact, though the emotions and interactions of the cast of characters are complex, the story is fairly straightforward. Ostensibly a tale of a small community on a Greek island, **The Maze** uses mythology and mystery to confront contemporary sexual politics.

Eventually, a new **Strange Weather Lately** story ran to ten issues with several intertwining threads wrapped around the odd life of Martin Nitram. (What if Northern Exposure had been set in Glasgow ... and was more surreal?) Real life and fantasy crossover throughout what might be just a tale of the staging of a theatre play. Hallucinations and murder intersect with coffee shop mundanity. The characters get confused by the characters they are playing on stage. On first reading, that can confuse the reader. But perseverance is rewarded as the threads unravel. Originally published over a year or so following on from the first issue, Strange Weather Lately has been collected into two trade paperback volumes.

These titles came in conventional (US) comic format, but next came the minicomic, **Vermin**.

This is a short, sad tale about an infestation, or, more accurately, a visit from mice. This is a good place to sample the Metaphrog story-telling style.

The surreal and complex nature of **Strange Weather Lately** and **The Maze** had observers worried when Metaphrog announced **Louis - Red Letter Day** – "designed to frighten and amuse children of all ages".

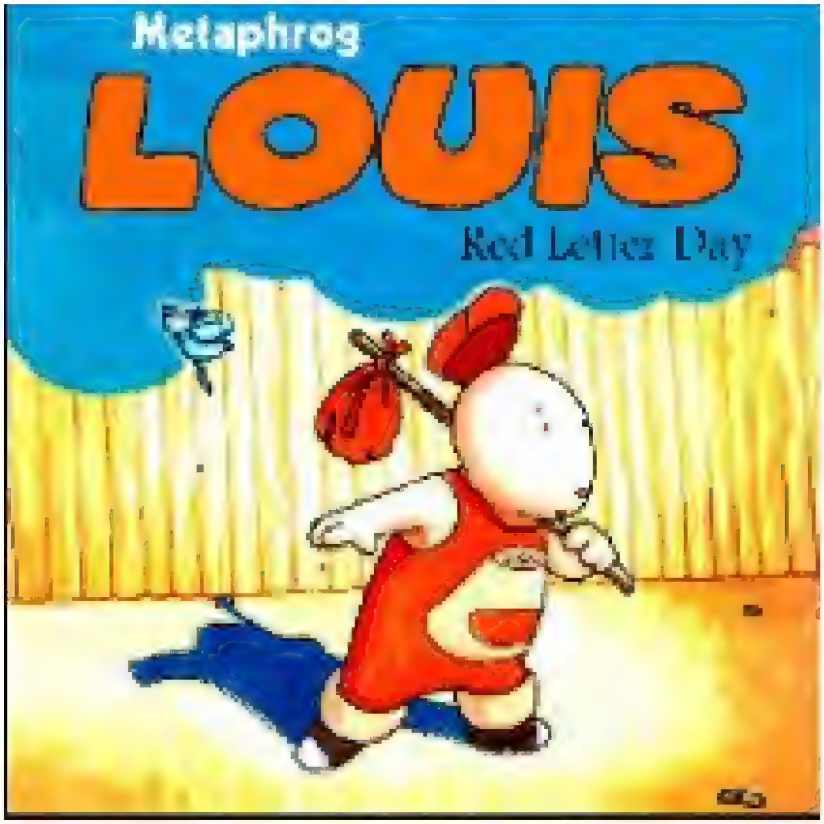
This looks and feels like a children's book. Louis looks like a mole of some sort, and has a childlike perspective on the strange community he inhabits. However, there are more mature subtexts at play.

I might tell you that the book is a combination of *Bod* and *The Prisoner*. [No apologies for the Brit-centric references, *Bod* was a kids TV show. *AB*] John has referred to it as "Wallace and Gromit meets Kafka".

In the midst of the Comics 2001 festival in Bristol, someone referred to John as "so incredibly enthusiastic about comics but he doesn't know who is drawing the X-Men". This intrigued me and I set about asking John and Sandra a few questions...

So what comics have been influential, and what comics do you enjoy?

JC: My exposure to comics was gradual, non-linear and in newsagents as well as bookshops. Charles Schulz, Goscinny and Uderzo, Herge, US second hand copies and reprints of work by people like Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, Carl Barks, Harvey Kurtzman. You could pick up digest-sized books, paperbacks, Commando comics, and the gamut of UK titles, these along with books would keep me quiet and amused. Genuinely funny comics not written for financial gain, character based stories and decent storytelling rather than trademarks. Children recognise the anarchism and satirical content of comics. A finger up to authority or hypocrisy. A person's inner world is partially formed by early experiences and comics were certainly a part of that. Later I picked up on underground comics like Bill Griffith's **Zippy**, and then current things like **Savage Pencil**, the obviously pseudonymous music paper strips, Alan Moore's



work especially the stuff with social comment, **RAW**. Learning about the comics' industry has been very gradual, for us it's a DIY thing, akin to punk or fanzine culture; something empowering, providing a sense of purpose and of course carrying an inherent responsibility. Realising you know nothing really, but trying, and hopefully learning a little and being able to advise others where possible.

The comics I enjoy are honest ones, things that have passion, not necessarily technically polished works. There's a lot of excellent stuff around and the best of it, for me at least, comes from creators with an innate need to write, or draw.

SM: As a kid I read **Tintin**, and a comic called **Sylvain et Sylvette**, and watched anime, and later on, Bilal, Hugo Pratt, Comès, to name some. I always had read avidly but mainly books, and discovered more anglophonic stuff when I moved to Britain a few years ago, like **Love & Rockets**, **Halo Jones**, Clowes for example. I greatly enjoy Tezuka and Otomo's work.

Louis: Red Letter Day **has the appearance and pace of a children's book and yet there are complex themes underlying it. It reflects real world lives in the simplified boxes they live in and the (mundane!) jobs they have.**

SM: Children's books shouldn't be just entertainment: there's little to be gained from reading an empty story, less by making one. The point is to make something meaningful as well as entertaining.

It would be patronising to children's abilities and intellect to set a rigidly defined world for them, and it's important that kids have an awareness of what's going on around them (without spoiling it for them of course!), especially when they are one of the main victims of consumerism. It was also a challenge for us to try and do something complex and yet simple, that everyone could enjoy. We weren't sure of what the outcome would be.

Have you had any response from parents? Any feedback from children?

SM: So far the responses we've had have been amazing. All ages seem to have responded positively, the smaller kids completely identifying with Louis, which is a great joy to witness. Younger adolescents seeming to see it more as a challenge, like they have to decode the story. And adults have told us of enjoying the reading as well as sharing the experience with their own kid. It also seems to have reached an audience that doesn't normally read comics.

JC: Many parents, it transpires, have bought the book for children named Louis. It's fantastic that comics gain new readers, especially young readers. Ours, obviously, isn't some mass marketed phenomena, so I think it can thus become seen as something special for people. It's touching to be told that people feel strongly about your work.

Children have given us feedback: "I liked it when his head fell off," or "It's good because letters come in." A two year old girl even wanted to come and meet Louis at the launch night. We did test drive the book on a group of children and the youngest 'get' the book on a very visceral, emotional level.

We're still trying to take on board the response to **Louis – Red Letter Day**. We've received letters at regular intervals from people, all over the world, who have really enjoyed the book or been made really miserable by it!

Where does Clive follow on from Louis ?

SM: It's about what happens to Louis after his fate in the last book, but it's self-contained so you don't have to have read the first one to follow it. In Red Letter Day, we wanted to talk about our modern western society and the way it alienates us, or imprisons us. **Lying to Clive** is more an observation – through a journey – of social inequalities and discriminations against cultures.

JC: It isn't easy to make value judgements of one's own work. It's certainly a lot less sad and melancholy in tone, but hopefully not less charming, than the first book. It's an attempt to explore the way our existence is shaped by metaphors.

It does take the form of a journey through which ideas about language are dealt with along with socio-economic issues. There is less of a trouble-in-toytown feel, it's probably more manic and acerbic.

What next for Metaphrog?

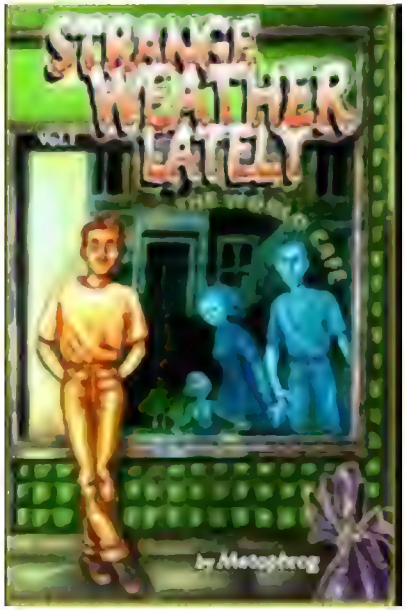
SM: A new Louis story, on a new theme, which should be released next year. We also plan to work on more adult stories again, but it's still in its infancy.

John Chalmers and Sandra Marrs were talking to Adrian Brown: An extended version of this interview is available online at

NinthArt

For further information about Metaphrog, contact John Chalmers via email metaphrog@metaphrog.com or visit the Metaphrog website at www.metaphrog.com

Louis: Red Letter Day is priced £9.95/ $15.95.
Louis: Lying To Clive is priced £9.49/ $14.95.



What is Manga?

Kevin Hill introduces his ongoing in-depth look at the world of Manga

WHEN I ask "what is manga?", you may think, "Not that old chestnut!", or, "He's going to tell me to buy some manga" – which is actually 100% right – or perhaps, "That's easy, big eyes, pointy noses, schoolgirls, sex and violence", but please bear with me.

Granted, the view that manga is big eyes, pointy noses, schoolgirls, sex and violence is not without foundation. Take Studio Clamp's **X/1999** for example. It has all the big eyes, pointy noses and schoolgirls manga clichés, with semi-naked and fully naked women, and violence in spades. In fact, rather graphic violence, including an almost literal birth of a sword that gives you some idea of how far Clamp take it.

Right, so I've just proved that manga is what you think it is. But that's like saying that all superhero books – like **Iron Man** and **The Authority** – or all independent releases – such as **Goodbye, Chunky Rice** and **The Marquis** – are identical.

They couldn't be more identical, could they – or does that sound stupid? What I'm trying to say is that, while manga is what you think it is, it isn't exactly what you think it is. Do you get me? No?

Okay, how about this – please forgive me for my next statement, it might sound incredibly patronizing. Manga are comics. There, I've said it. Just look at them – pictures, words in balloons, the whole nine yards – comics, pure and simple.

As with the English-language mainstream or independent markets, not all Japanese comics are the same. But you already knew that. In Japan, there are comics about pretty much everything – cooking, baseball, teachers, judo. You name it, there's likely to be a comic available on the subject, and that includes the less than salubrious subjects. I'm not here to tell you that – although if you didn't know that, then I've just told you anyway.

So, what am I here to tell you? Well, rather than follow the route of evangelizing "manga" because of the wide-ranging subjects found in the Japanese telephone-directory-sized anthologies, over the coming months I'll introduce you to a variety of books currently available in translated form, and in genres you might be familiar with.

From sci-fi works like Kia Asamiya's **Nadesico** and Leiji Matsumoto's **Galaxy Express 999**, through the sword and sorcery tales of Asamiya's **Dark Angel** and the magical land of **Record of Lodoss War**, into the crime-ridden worlds of Buronson and Ryoichi Ikegami's **Strain** or Jinpachi Mori and Jiro Taniguchi's **Benkei in New York**, touching the world of the political epics of Kaiji Kawaguchi's **Eagle: The Making of an Asian-American President** and Sho Fumimura and Ikegami's **Sanctuary**, and into the paranormal adventures of Hiroshi Takashige and Ryoji Minagawa's **Striker** or Asamiya's **Silent Möbius**. You'll even find out about romance comics like Miwa Ueda's **Peach Girl**.

"What about superheroes?" I hear you ask. That's actually the tricky one. Or is it? Let's take another look at one of those I've already mentioned above. **Striker** features Yu Ominae, a youth with a secret – he's actually a special agent for a force who track down artefacts and prevent them from falling into the wrong hands. Brash and confident, wearing a suit of armour that amplifies his strength, he cares greatly for the task at hand, putting himself in the line of fire on a number of occasions – against foes who often outclass him – while still leading a normal life as a teenage schoolboy. Sound familiar? Shades of **Spider-Man** and **Iron Man** obviously – although Ominae swaps webbing and repulsors for an M16.

While it isn't exactly a superhero comic, **Striker** has uncanny similarities, and it's not the only one.

A comic with far more obvious connections to the world of superheroes is Akira Toriyama's **Dragon Ball**, whose character Son Goku crash landed on earth as a child. It eventually transpires – at the beginning of the sequel **Dragon Ball Z** – that Goku's home planet has been destroyed.

Now, if that's not a homage to **Superman**, what is? **Dragon Ball** and **Dragon Ball Z** are set in a unique world full of anthropomorphic creatures, dinosaurs, flying cars and gods, with a focus firmly set on adventure with a particular slant towards martial arts. And it is fun. Probably more fun than **Superman**, especially if you like fight scenes that span twenty or thirty pages – sometimes even more.

As you can see, most of the more popular genres covered by the likes of Marvel, DC, Image and CrossGen, are available in a manga form, and the above examples are just the beginning. Perhaps now you'll take a longer look at the manga section of your comic shop. If you're not convinced, then be here for more detailed looks at the genres, series and creators of the translated titles available: maybe you'll change your mind. Let the evangelism begin.

WHY YOU SHOULD BE READING PETRA ETCETERA

PETRA ETCETERA is the latest title to come out of Gratuitous Bunny Comix, stalwarts of the UK small press scene for over 12 years.

GBC were originally formed by writer Dave McKinnon and artist Terry Wiley, publishing titles such as **Sleaze Castle**, **Tales From Sleaze Castle** and **Surreal School Stories**. In recent years, they were joined by a second writer, Adrian Kermode, and the seeds of spin-off title **Petra Etcetera** were sown.

However, Dave McKinnon recently announced his retirement from comics, because his enthusiasm had waned. Coming hot on the heels of winning this year's National Comic Award for Best Self-published/Indy Comic at **COMICS 2001** in Bristol, there has been much speculation about what the future holds for the Bunnies. **Jay Eales** spoke to Terry Wiley and Adrian Kermode:

JAY: Can we start with a short but sweet potted history of Gratuitous Bunny Comix?

TERRY: Dave had the idea to do a comic in 1987, but we didn't actually get round to finishing it until 1989! The Gratuitous Bunny angle came about when one of our readers noticed the bunny in **More Tales** #1 and said she would buy it if we put the bunny in as much as possible – hence various, indeed gratuitous, appearances of the bunny!

We thought we were in a minority of one until the small press review zine **ZUM**! came out and showed us there were dozens of other groovy comics out there as well. We were selling quite well direct through shops by about 1992-94, when Tales came out, and were picked up by Diamond in 1995.

Dave was finding it harder to write by then, so spin-offs like Tales and **Surreal School Stories** were designed to give him a breather, but he decided to give up altogether in 1996. He later came back to do issues 7 and 8, but was flagging again with #9, so I drafted in an extra writer – Adrian – to do a back-up story *Petra Etcetera*. Eventually Dave admitted he hates writing anyway, and had no inclination to do anything any more, so....

ADY: But even though they started off as a small press venture Terry and Dave took it seriously from the start. Gratuitous Bunny were the first independent/self-published outfit to adopt the American comic book format and professional production values, and the first to publish reprint collections in trade paperback format, and both of those have since become the norm with the likes of Paul Grist's **Kane** and Gary Spencer Millidge's **Strangehaven**.

And of course, this year all that time and effort and quality paid off when we finally won the National Comic Award after years of being nominated.

JAY: Ady and Billy: How did you come to be involved in GBC?

ADY: Well, Terry and I have known each other over 20 years, so I followed **More Tales** from the start, and I actually contributed a one page filler to an early issue. Their stuff was completely unlike anything else being done at the time – totally genre defying – and when Terry and Dave asked if I wanted to do **Petra Etcetera**, I was just chuffed to become a part of that and play with their toys.

Unfortunately Billy can't be with us today because of the restraining orders, but when Terry was up against a very tight deadline to produce Petra #2 in time for Caption 2000, we brought Billy in to do the back page pin-up. We were so pleased with the result it's now a regular feature.

JAY: How did the Petra spin-off from **Sleaze Castle** come about?

TERRY: I came up with another story Adrian could do which could attach to the rest of the mythos with minimal impact. The only point of contact is Petra, who hasn't really been in the main storyline THAT much...

ADY: It was originally just going to be a back-up strip, to give Dave a breather by only doing 12 pages of script an issue. But, after the "two-in-one" format of **Petra** #1/**More Tales** #9, it was decided to make Petra a full spin-off series while the main story continued in collected book form.

JAY: Would you like to attempt to sum up what the book is about for the boys and girls out there who may have been unaware of what they're missing?

TERRY: It's the story of Jo's wacky sister Petra and her friends, involving a lot of drinking, snogging and the occasional fight, plus the emotional interplay between Jo and Petra.

ADY: But it's also an age-old "love-triangle" tale involving Petra, her boyfriend and a mysterious stranger who keeps turning up. There is a long-term plot underlying it all, though, and I have a definite end in mind that I'm working towards – a bit like James Robinson's **Starman** but with less spandex and more sex.

And don't forget the "Etcetera" – Petra's friends take centre stage from time to time, though Petra and the main plot will still be bubbling away in the background.

JAY: **Petra** is a more naturalistic book than **Sleaze Castle**, distinctly lacking in Little Happy Creatures running amok. I could easily see Petra fitting in the same playground as Nick Abadzis' later *Hugo Tate* stories in **Deadline**. Is that the sort of niche you're going for?

TERRY: We didn't have Hugo Tate in mind, although Tales has been compared to it. I suppose deep down Dave wanted to do **Cerebus**, a convoluted, multi-layered non-naturalistic story, whereas I wanted to do **Love & Rockets**, more of a day-to-day, on-the-street sort of thing, which I suppose the general reader has less trouble getting into.

ADY: I definitely see Petra in the **Love & Rockets** mould. Real life is just as dramatic as any space opera or spandex fantasy to those living it.

Whether or not that gorgeous blonde I met and liked so much ever gets in touch with me again is more important to me than the end of the world. It's easy to use Doc Doom's latest world-destroying frammistat to generate suspense and entertain your readers, but it's more challenging to make them care about your characters and the minutiae of their "lives" in a more naturalistic story.

JAY: Do you find the period setting of the series in the eighties as a hindrance or a strength of the book?

TERRY: It just turned out that way because the publishing gap is so much longer than the action of the story, plus to avoid stepping on Dave's toes, every spin off story had to take place *before* the 'main' plot. I think the readers would kill us if we tried to do a 'year zero' thing and time-shift everything into the 21st Century! I don't mind sticking to the timeline – it's not *that* much different is it? Not like it was the Stone Age!

ADY: I find it more irritating than a hindrance. I'd love to do some witty social commentary stuff about today's society; the way teenagers are mutating into some strange species of hybrid cyborgs with cellphones and backwards baseball caps permanently melded to their heads, for example, but the setting precludes that.

There's always a danger that it may eventually alienate any new readers who *do* regard anything before they were born as the "Stone Age". But in 1985 Terry and I were about the same age as our characters are supposed to be so we have a lot of actual experiences to mine for stories.

JAY: It's interesting to note that for an all-male creative team, all GBC titles seem to have female protagonists. Why do you think that is?

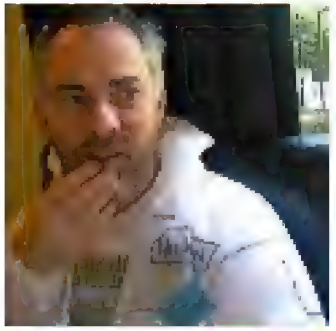
TERRY: Um... partly because in so many other stories women get nothing better to do than be rescued, or sport enormous tits and fire guns... all the other 'grown-up' media have no problems with depicting regular women in regular roles – why shouldn't comics? Plus female characters can get away with a much broader range and wardrobe than stuffy males can – they're more fun to draw.

ADY: Almost all of my close friends are women and, while I don't have any blinding insights into the female psyche, they have taught me how to fake a pretty good orgasm (laughs). A lot of Petra is based on events and experiences that actually happened to those friends (and three of the characters are based on them) so I have a wealth of anecdotes and material to draw from that I hope gives the book a more realistic feel.

Besides – women are just more interesting to write for.

Terry Wiley:
Terry (39) works in computer hotline support and also does magazine covers. He has a grumpy dog, and a ponytail which no-one likes except him!

Dave McKinnon:
Dave (83), Sub-Genius Pope of the Northern England Whisky enthusiast and fireworks fanatic.



Adrian Kermode:
Ady (37) works for an unnamed Government Agency. His favourite drink is Jack Daniels & Tequila, and his favourite obsessions are Christina Ricci and 1960's British comics, but not necessarily in that order.

Billy Armstrong:
Billy (16) is a strong but gentle creature who lives in the dense rainforests of Sunderland, where he forages for nuts and berries. And beer.

JAY: What sort of readership does Petra attract? Is there a big female following? Who is your target audience?

ADY: We seem to go down well with the university crowd, who can probably relate to the setting and situations, regardless of the time period. I do feel self-conscious about being a man writing for female characters, but a lot of our readers are women so I suppose we're getting something right. Our target audience is just anyone and everyone who we can part from their cash.

TERRY: It's a bit funny – we don't meet the audience that often! From those we have seen it seems to be about 50/50, which isn't bad for a comic. I suppose we're aiming for the sort of person who generally doesn't read comics at all, since they outnumber the ones who do 19-1!

JAY: With an Eagle nomination after Petra's debut in **Sleaze Castle** #9's flipbook format, and the recent win at the Comics 2001 National Comic Awards, do you intend to ramp up production on Petra in order to capitalise on the higher profile it has right now, especially in light of the sad discontinuation of the main **Sleaze Castle** title?

TERRY: Um, as you probably know, nearly everyone in comics these days needs a 'real' job on the side to keep body and soul together! So, short of a mighty lottery win, the output will remain fairly sparse, but constant! I'd go so far as to say we'll bring out at least two new items a year, be they Petra or something else.

ADY: Well I have the next two issues of Petra plotted and partly written so those would be my choice for the two new items we put out this year!

However, with Dave's departure and the discontinuing of the main Sleaze Castle storyline, now would also be a good time to retain that readership with the launch of **Beautiful Freak**, which is sort of Panda's origin story. This is something Terry and I will have to discuss down a dark alley with pieces of lead pipe, I think.

JAY: Why so long between issues? Is it purely for financial reasons, or more to do with Terry doing almost all of the art?

TERRY: Yep, as it stands, if I don't draw it, it doesn't come out! And I can only draw when I get time...

JAY: Would you contemplate bringing on board another artist or collaborator to ease the workload, or is it too personal to let go?

TERRY: Oboy, that's a tough one! In my egotistical stance I'd say I'd like to either draw *or* write everything in the comic, so any new artists would be drawing my stuff. I'd hate to get to the point where *both* me and Dave end up retired and watching someone else playing with our toys!

ADY: I still see Petra very much as the spin-off of the main story, and as such would be happy to let another artist loose on it if that meant Terry was free to produce **Beautiful Freak**. But any new artist would have to be pretty good to ensure we don't lose the high standard Terry's set. And they'd have to be pretty cheap too because they wouldn't get paid!

JAY: On a related theme, will Billy be doing any full strips for GBC, or does he prefer to do one-off illustrations?

TERRY: Billy is a jolly nice chap and a good egg! However, he is a perfectionist and without regular jolts from an electric cattle prod is apt to take as long to draw as Dave does to write! We haven't anything lined up for him yet, but I see no reason why he shouldn't contribute in that way.

ADY: I've seen his strip work and he's almost as good as Terry, but slower.

I'd be happy to let him have a go at Petra, but only if Terry acted in an editorial capacity – the Sleaze Castle mythos has a distinct visual style and I wouldn't want to damage that.

JAY: Terry, tell us more about this side-project **Beautiful Freak** that keeps getting mentioned?

TERRY: **Beautiful Freak** was of course inspired by the eponymous Eels song, and turns out to be the literal translation of Panda's full name, "Pandadomino". It'll be the epic story of Panda and her family from birth up to her ascension to the throne of **Sleaze Castle**. God knows when I'll get time to do it! It'll need a ton of background worked out, and enough plot to occupy the cast for about 30 years! But we'll at least get to find out who all those sisters of Panda's are, plus what happened to everybody else who used to live there...

JAY: I understand that there are plans to bring out a reprint collection of Petra, possibly incorporating extra material. What can you tell us about that?

TERRY: Well, Adrian has already written at least three extra scenes which go in between the issues to expand on the plot. And after a long hard look at **Petra** #3 we have to admit it does lurch along a bit in places, especially the end, so we'll expand #3 by another 12 pages or so. All told, we'll then have enough Petra for a Director's Cut-sized book, which we would bring out after the original issues have sold out – late 2002?

JAY: What's next for Petra?

TERRY: I believe we finally get to meet Petra's best friend in the next one! Adrian?

ADY:No, her best friend's called Lydia, not Adrian. (THWAP!) Ouch.

Petra Etcetera #1-3 are available from all good comics shops, or direct from Gratuitous Bunny Comix (**Sleaze Castle** and other titles also available) at:
PO Box 382,
Newcastle, NE99 1LT
£2 +p&p

BLINKERS OFF

"From the simplest of lines Simmonds can conjure up a world of nuance and even novelistic insight. Gemma's thought bubble at the bottom of page 65 told me more than I had ever known about the working of a woman's mind in love. But any drawing of Gemma's face tells its own story with clarity and force." From Nick Lezard's review of Gemma Bovery – **The Guardian** 1999.

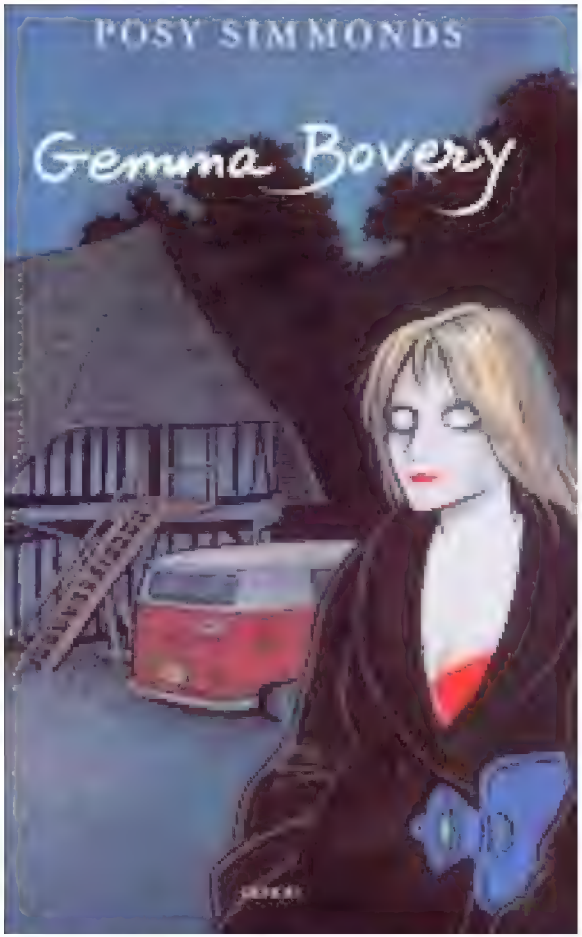
THAT you might not have heard of this book is what this column is about. I intend to look at comic books that, for one reason or another, are not perceived by the comic book industry and fandom in general to be "comic books". Over the months I'll be looking at historical curiosities, obscure gems, really far out weird stuff, and comics that, despite their critical and commercial success, the comics' industry seems to have no time for. I want to show you, the traditional comic reader, how rich and varied the medium is. In the long-term I will try to examine why this exclusion takes place on so many different levels. After all, the mainstream comics' industry made a hero out of Bill Sienkiewicz with his and Frank Miller's **Elektra** series. Why do other creators, many of whom have a more traditional, friendly style than Billy the Sink, pass under the radar? Why did you not see Posy Simmonds' work in your local comic shop?

Posy Simmonds began cartooning in 1977 with her hit weekly strip in **The Guardian** that ran for ten years spawning many - now sadly out of print – collections. It established Posy as one of the UK's most loved cartoonists. Her work centred on the lives and sensibilities of the British middle classes and their petty foibles and worries. Posy brought this humanity to the fore, gently poking fun at her subjects while allowing them to grow and develop. She then expanded into children's books that strengthened her fan base. Posy does not compromise her style in her children's books. They are 100% comic books with panels, word balloons and yet so expertly produced that no-one thought they were buying their children a comic.

Throughout this time Posy was barely recognised by the English-speaking comics community. A mention in a book of women cartoonists would rave about her newspaper strips, the 80's British comix crowd would acknowledge her importance in magazines like Escape, but she would never draw the crowds at events like UKCAC. She had developed her art and built up her following in a completely different field. She didn't need us. A Google search produces many articles on her in French and Italian with only a few English mentions. Ever get the feeling you're missing something that's right under your nose? Something like **Gemma Bovery**?

Gemma Bovery was published as a slim and tall hardcover, its 106 pages encased in a very smart package that any adult would not feel the slightest bit ashamed to be caught reading. And read it they did, first when the whole story was serialised in **The Guardian** at a page a day, and then in this collection which the publisher Jonathan Cape, who usually deal in best-selling literary fiction, have called "a roaring success". Not bad for a comic book. It tells the story of a young woman, Gemma, who marries Charlie, a divorcee furniture restorer. After an inheritance they move to a country house in Normandy where Gemma, ever uncertain of what she is doing or why, begins to feel restless, especially as Charlie, revelling in the laissez faire atmosphere of cheap wine and ciggies, becomes the extreme opposite of exciting. Bored and restless, Gemma starts an affair with a young French aristo and it all goes horribly wrong ending in her accidental death. The story is told from the point of view of Joubert, the intellectual baker from the village who becomes intrigued when he realises she shares her name with the fatal heroine of Flaubert's novel **Madame Bovary**, and then obsessed when her life begins to follow the same patterns of boredom, adultery and debt as her namesake's. He follows her every move and takes steps to prevent her literary fate without success. Of course there is no mystical connection between Mesdames Bovery/Bovary.

Gemma's life is not that unusual. People get bored, have affairs and get into debt all the time. On the face of it, the story is really nothing much and the notion of the British in France has been done to death by Peter Mayle and his countless clones. But by taking this fantastical idea and having Joubert expound it to such a degree Posy brings the mundaneness of Gemma to life. By making her potentially more than she is, the humanity is brought out to shine. This is why the book works and possibly why it works best as a comic. Comics and cartooning are about taking archetypes and telling stories through them. Gemma is a typical young English woman with



a confused life and the supporting cast are, on the whole, stereotypes. That Posy takes this pre-Bridget Jones and tells a story so engaging, emotional and at times profound, is a testament not to her overcoming this obstacle but to her ability to tease out the details, the meanings, in a way only a simple cartooned face can achieve.

Gemma Bovery is not simply a comic book that no one knows is a comic book. It is a bona-fide masterpiece of the comic book medium because it understands the nuances of what makes comics work. The combination of words and pictures work together to produce something that is not better or worse than a novel or painting but uniquely different.

That Posy Simmonds has produced a pitch perfect graphic novel without the support or interest of the traditional comics community is at first surprising, but should we really be surprised? Comics are a universal medium and, as we shall discover in this column, can come from anywhere. An awareness of these works is, I feel, vital to anyone who really wants to understand what comics are capable of. They offer fresh insight and a reminder of the power and range of our much maligned medium. Needless to say, I heartily recommend you read **Gemma Bovery**.

Peter Ashton

Gemma Bovery is published by Jonathan Cape, ISBN 0224061143, priced £8.99 in paperback.

Web links: The Publishers:
www.randomhouse.co.uk
The Guardian review:
http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,6121,378410,00.html
Posy online:
http://www.guardian.co.uk/gall/0,8542,502803,00.html

BURNING DOWN THE CURTAIN

Rich Johnston writes the rumour column *All The Rage* at *http://www.silverbulletcomicbooks.com*

IN THE rare collectors limited edition issue #½ of this esteemed PDF publication (how they got the chromium embossed cover to work digitally, I'll never know) I told a few tales about modern Marvel that have come my way while writing my comics gossip column. Here's a few more...

X Marks The Spat

NOW, **The Brotherhood**, onto its second issue, is written by Howard Mackie. Strange, hiding behind a large X sign was intended to be used as a tool of anonymity, instead its made him a target. Conceptually, it's a harsher, streetwise look at a bunch of young mutants – and bears a superficial resemblance to the previously publicised **X-Men: New York Stories** or **NYX**, which would have been written by **Channel Zero** and Generation X writer Brian Wood and drawn by **Sloe Jam** creator and professional modern artist, David Choe.

When this book was aborted before even being solicited, David Choe made a series of extreme remarks aimed at Joe Quesada, expounding upon his credibility, trustworthiness and sexuality. Not the best way to get a man to change his mind.

Some saw the book as too similar to **The Brotherhood** conceptually, even though in execution it was very different – and that's why it was cancelled. But here's the story I heard at the time, which later sources have verified further. I heard it involved the two editors on the book, Jenny Lee and Mira Lew. It seems this book was originally Marvel publisher Bill Jemas's concept, as he's been very hands on with a number of books of late. I heard he wanted Brian Wood to write it based on his work on **Generation X**, and Wood's proposal seemed to go over well enough that the project was green-lit. Mira Lew was assigned as editor – she was Bill Jemas's assistant and had been promoted to editor of the Marvel DotComics line. Jenny Lee with her Vertigo background was hired by Marvel, with an eye to working on the Mature Readers line – hence her appointment as co-editor to this series, featuring a number of non-mainstream creators.

However, while Jemas was initially a champion on the book, praising the initial proposal by Wood and wanting X-characters Rogue, Gambit and Jubilee to appear prominently, that seems to have changed. One version states that there was a strong difference of opinion between Mira and Jenny as to how the book should progress, Brian in agreement with Jenny, following his original proposal. Here the story gets blurrier, but it seems that Mira was able to convince Jemas that her take was the right one. But because neither Brian nor Jenny agreed with Mira's take, a deadlock occurred and the book was canned.

Macchio The Knife

With the firing of Bobbie Chase from Marvel recently, it seems that the only two editors with a history under the previous editor-in-chief are Tom Brevoort and Ralph Macchio. With Bob Harras, I hear, currently setting up an imprint with Jim Lee and John Nee over at Wildstorm, maybe he'll be able to bring the old crowd back. There are some fun Macchio stories that still circulate though – here's one, courtesy of a friend of Mark Gruenwald, that made its way to me.

When Mark Gruenwald's daughter was a toddler, Mark brought her old baby monitor into work at Marvel Comics and put the transmitter right out in plain sight in Ralph Macchio's office, then put the receiver in his own office, a few doors down. All day long people would go into Ralph's office and get chatted up by him, then run down to Mark's office to hear the nasty things he said about them when they left. A couple of times the laughter from Mark's office got so loud – people were crowding in there by that point – that Ralph came down to see what was going on. Everyone acted innocent, Ralph went back to his office and the games continued. I don't know if he ever found out about it, and he never noticed the monitor...

Ask Me No Questions

Of course the best stories are always the ones I can't tell. Or at least I can't mention the individuals involved. But at least they give a certain flavour to the industry. And it's always fun to guess...

Just how committed to their art are some creators? Which comics creator had to wrap his GameBoy up in duct tape and stick it on the top of a wardrobe in order to keep it from stopping him drawing? Which comics publisher in his early art-days was inking a cover but delayed it and the book by months, only adding one line every time the editor called?

And when it comes to drugs – well, what do you expect? Which naïve and innocent English shop owner was asked by a guest to acquire illegal substances a few years ago and had to go out on her own to find said gear using contacts from her more "dodgy" customers? Which A-list creator, reportedly high since he was 11, quit dope at New Year... and has seen his working speed increase as a result? Which other A-list creator, reportedly on 40 spliffs a day, has reduced his in-toke to a mere 20? And which creative/exec used to take bunches of gold and platinum variants of his company's comics and trade them with a local comic dealer for high quality hard drugs?

The answers, my friend, are blowing in the wind. Or, at least, after I've drunk one or two pints which you've kindly bought me. See you in a pub close to you soon...

ISSUES

I AM a mean, spiteful bitch. I could start an argument in an empty room and pick fault with St. Francis of Assisi.

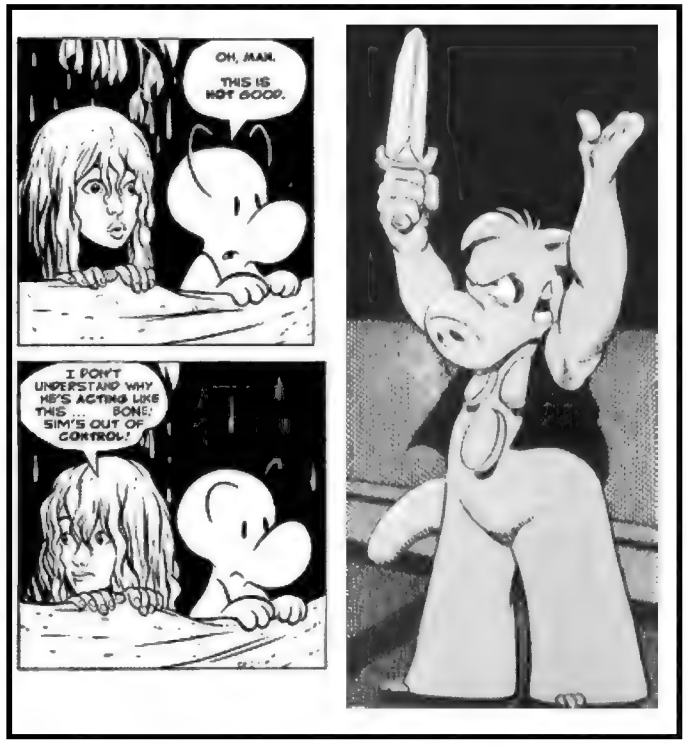
I have issues.

* * *

Am I the only person who thinks bonkers **Cerebus** writer/artist Dave Sim deserves a hearty pat on the back and a jolly 'well done, sir' for challenging **Bone**'s Jeff Smith to a fistfight? Face it, Sim's throwing down of the gauntlet is easily the most entertaining thing to happen in **Cerebus** for at least a decade – although, obviously, the umpteen recent issues he's spent herding sheep run it a close second – and has even got the self righteous old fogies over at **The Comics Journal** talking about something other than Jimmy fekking Corrigan for once.

I, for one, sincerely hope that the Smith boxing match is the first of many such challenges that the aardvark-in-chief chucks our way in the coming months. In fact, is it too much to hope that the nutty old misogynist might just start a new trend for creator-on-creator violence?

Just imagine what a giggle it would be to see Chris Claremont slug it out in the ring with his old sparring partner John Byrne, or for Todd McFarlane and Neil Gaiman to beat the tar out of each other over the ownership rights to **Miracleman**.



Jesus, my breathing's getting heavy just thinking about it. After all, a 'survival of the fittest' philosophy is already at the core of at least one major company's thinking. At a recent press conference, Marvel big cheese Joe Quesada talked at length about 'Darwinism' and surely there's no better way of sorting the strong from the weak, the wheat from the chaff and the Morrisons from the Caseys than to let them just fight each other. And, hey, why do they have to stop at just punching and clinching – let's get some weapons involved, too, and make it a real gladiatorial occasion.

What could be more captivating than watching Chuck Dixon, stripped to the waist, with only a flimsy shield for protection, desperately dodging blow after savage blow from a broadsword-wielding Devin Grayson? Nothing, that's what.

* * *

"WHAT the hell are you thinking? Do you really want this book to be canned? Do you have any idea how ridiculous the characters look?" – From a letter published in **X-Force** #117.

I'm not usually one to waste precious seconds of my life contemplating the letters pages of Marvel comics, but some of the missives published in **X-Force** #117 – like the one quoted above – are such a monument to the frightening conservatism prevalent among fans, that I just couldn't let it slide.

Here they are, the **X-Force** readership, faced with a stark choice between the same old soap opera antics that have blighted the mutie books for the best part of 20 years, or something completely fresh, courtesy of Peter Milligan and Mike Allred's daringly creative leap in the dark. And what do they do? Chuck their toys out of their prams and bleat on and on about Cannonball and Dani Moonstar like they're the Great Gatsby and Lady Macbeth, rather than two largely unloved no-hopers from the worst X-team ever assembled.

The best of it is that none of these knee-jerk nay-sayers had actually had the chance to see a completed issue before venting their spleens so spectacularly. Yep, that's right, comments like the one above were written and mailed *before* the first new issue of **X-Force** had even hit the shelves, and were based purely and simply on a couple of pages of sample art and some press release stuff on the Net. It wouldn't be so bad but to all intents and purposes X-Force is still a mutant superhero comic. Its protagonists still have mutant super powers and fight mutant supervillains. From the bleating of the X-gimps you'd think their precious

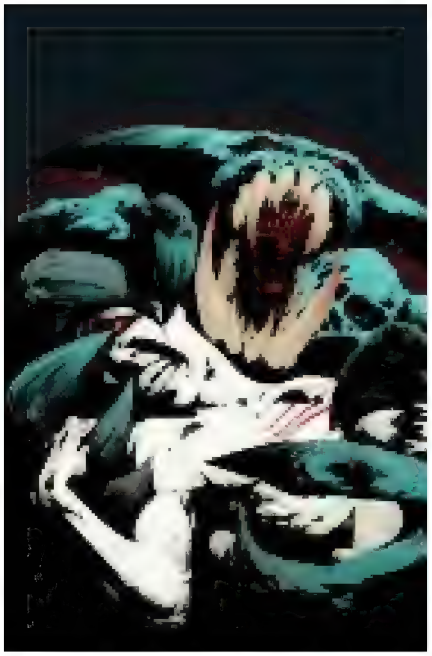
title was about to be turned into some kind of **Raw**-esque bacchanalia, full of experimental material concerned solely with indiscriminate drug use and perverse sexual practices. Although, thinking about it, that'd make a hell of a new direction for **Captain America**.

This type of fan annoys me in a way only Jamie Oliver comes close to matching. Not only because his/her taste in comics is so bad as to include pre-Milligan/Allred **X-Force**, but also because you just know these people have never tried reading a truly radical or experimental title in their utterly wretched little lives. They are comics' equivalent of the music fans whose CD collections refuse to extend beyond Celine Dion and Simply Red, or the movie buffs that genuinely think *Titanic* is the best film ever made. They should all be lined up against a wall and made to read a few issues of **Strangehaven**, **Murder Me Dead** or **Palookaville**. They'd soon see the error of their ways.

Gard Close

DRAWING BOARD

SECRETS FROM THE ARTIST'S PORTFOLIO



Frazer Irving artwork from *A Love Like Blood* serialized in the UK's **2000AD**. Series written by John Smith.

IS THERE any wonder why people are heralding Frazer Irving as one of the best young illustrators on the scene? All artists come out of obscurity, but in Frazer's case he had the chance very early and missed it.

"I'm a comprehensive-school-educated-suburbanite, with a degree and a student loan debt. I like drawing, music and girls. Comics are fun too!"

He's been drawing comics since 1993 when, "I discovered that I needed to draw to enable myself to go to art school (and thus attain my ambition of becoming a rock star) and I've been doodling on and off since then." But he's only "been doing it properly since late 1999 when I managed to get some paid bits and bobs" and things could have possibly been different...

"Back in 1988 (when I was young and innocent), I managed to get some work from some company called 'Cartoon Aid' who did charity cartoon books for Great Ormond Street Hospital as well as other clients. I did a crappy picture of something called 'Superdrupa' and was promptly offered full-time employment (as well as the boss's daughter fancying me!), but I declined as I foolishly thought that if I stayed on at 6th form and got an "n" for theatre studies then I could possibly travel the world as an actor. How stupid. I got paid £35 for that pic and never heard of 'Cartoon Aid' ever again.

"So, twelve years later I manage to find myself back in comics. First comics gig was with **2000AD**, being the commission of *Necronauts*, even though I did a few *Future Shocks* while I waited for Gordon [Rennie] to finish the script.

"Currently, I'm waiting for Gordon (again) to finish tweaking a new series we've wanted to do for some time, about psychedelic stuff and whatnot. I'm also engaged in 'dialogue' with [a major comics company].

"The good thing about what I'm doing right now is that I have control over my product. **2000AD** allows me to control almost every aspect of the art which means I can try out new things and make new mistakes! But it's all good for the readers, of which I am still one.

"For the future... well I dunno. More money? It'd be nice to see a few of the strips I've worked on make the leap to movies if only to say to all my non-comic reading mates "See? Nyer nyer nyer,"... as well as the money.

"Did I mention money? The best things in life are free, etc. I'd like to expand my client base more, if only to reach a wider audience. Though sales on comics are lower per book these days, I still think there's a lot of readers out there. A lot of **2000AD** readers I know of don't read American comics and vice versa, so doing stuff on both sides of the Atlantic would effectively double my audience, and then cross-pollination would occur.

"I have a sense of loyalty towards the British comics scene, in the respect that a permanent migration to other countries is out of the question, but I've also noticed that there is only a certain amount that can be done within the pages of current British comics. I still have a hankering to do a 24-page comic!

"Oh, keep a look out for *Reefer Madness*, a 5-page short due to see print in **2000AD** prog 1263, I think. That'll be early in October. You'll love it."

Frazer Irving was talking to Phil Hall.

More of Frazer Irving's artwork from *Necronauts* serialized in the UK's **2000AD**. Series written by Gordon Rennie.

MITZY FANTASTICO

OH, HI Lara. Glad you could come over. I'd, well, I'd been meaning to have this talk with you. There's no easy way to say this, so I'll just come right out with it – I don't think we should see each other anymore. Yes, yes, I know it's sudden for you, but, well, it's been on my mind for a while now. When you first came into my life, it was fantastic. There'd never been anything like you before. Oh, sure there were other girls, but you seemed so real to me, so 3D. And there was the action, and the adventures. You could stand up for yourself, and knew how to handle anything that came your way. You were tough, you were rich, and you were beautiful – I was in heaven. And it stayed that way for a while. We had many adventures, you and me, still living in the wondrous world of 3D excitement, even though your boobs were shaped a little oddly. But, within our second year, things started to change.

You were becoming more and more famous. Your image was in many magazines, on clothing, mouse pads, toys, even on TV. And I started hearing things from other people. Others claimed they knew you, knew you like I did. Of course, I dismissed this as falsehoods at first, but then I started seeing your face attached to various different names like Natalie Cook, Rhona Mitra and Angelina Jolie. Were you cheating on me? What other reasons could you have for adopting different names?

I still didn't want to believe it, though. You still appealed to me in ways nobody else has. You offered me a third adventure, with all new outfits (I have to admit, it was about time you changed your clothes) and exciting new challenges like breaking into government installations.

Things were sweet again, and I'd pretty much forgotten about the confusion over the false aliases. But then I saw the internet rumours. 'Lara Croft – nude raider' – could this be true? There were pictures, all over the 'net, proclaiming your alleged 'secret' adventures in your birthday suit. You denied these rumours, obviously. Pictures can be faked, after all. And I fell for it. Of course I did. I was still hooked. I loved our adventures and our comics and our merchandising.

I needed it.

But the movie, the movie was the last straw, Lara. You just don't have the appeal you had anymore.

You've overkilled me and all your fans, and I can see our relationship wasn't real. It never really was. Beneath all the hype and the fun you're a wireframe of a girl, a personality-devoid sprite, acting out others' wishes and letting them control your life for you. I'm sorry, but I can't live like this with you anymore.

So, sorry Lara. It's over.

Mitzy

Breaking down the 4th Wall

Comics Graphic Novels
Fandom Comment
Discussion

IT'S A FAN-THING

WOULD you take your mother to your local comic shop? Well, would you?

I wouldn't, nor would I take my father, sister, niece or nephew.

This isn't because they do not like or do not read comics, rather it is because they would feel very uncomfortable and out of place in the majority of comic shops.

The mother who quite happily took me into alternative clothing shops when I was 15 and didn't bat an eyelid at the bondage gear on display in another section of the shop prefers to stand outside when I nip into comic shops.

When I started venturing into comic shops a couple of years ago with my boyfriend, they filled me with the same kind of feelings that I experienced when I went into a sci-fi bookshop for the first time at age fourteen. The feeling that I had wandered into a predominantly male domain – where strange looks were cast upon me – and if I showed a lack of knowledge I would be ridiculed or ignored.

I have been going into shops such as Forbidden Planet for ten years, but during that time I never looked at any comics until I met my boyfriend because I didn't know what they were, these strange, brightly coloured objects sheathed in plastic or stacked in boxes with mysterious labels such as Marvel or DC.

Sometimes I still get butterflies in my stomach when having to ask questions in some comics shops, because I don't know who published a certain comic and don't know whether I should look on the DC wall, in among the independents or even in the manga corner.

I come from a book background and I could tell you the author or title – but the publisher? Nah, doesn't mean a thing to me.

I would not take my niece or nephew into some comic shops because they would be able to look at material unsuitable to their age.

For example, I noticed in one shop the other day that a section of adult European comics – many sporting titillating images – were arranged on low level shelves and at the end of one shelf there was a small area labelled 'for younger readers'.

Basically, I feel many comic shops are not at all user-friendly, be it due to the arrangement of stock, the smell of fanboy in the morning or the staff attitude or the overall image they project.

However, I don't have a downer on all comic shops.

I think there are some excellent comic shops out there - shops I will happily enter, clutching a list of titles, to be met by friendly staff who will point me in the right direction, tell me what is currently out of stock, offer to order items in for me and generally make me feel like a valued customer rather than an ignorant interloper. Shops where there is a large trade paperback section with labels recommending titles or describing what the title is about.

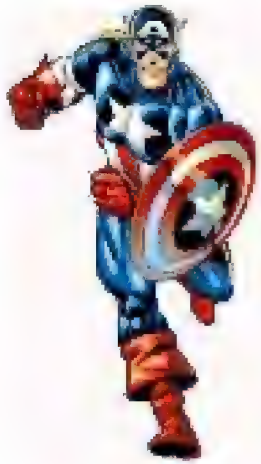
I have taken my mother to one of these comic shops, and I could leave her happily browsing the humour section. She commented upon leaving how nice and helpful the staff had seemed compared to "normal" shops.

I'm selfish, I want more comic shops like this. Shops where I can be proud to take my family – shops which aren't uncomfortable to enter – and where I can point my niece to the section containing **Scary Godmother** or **Louis: Red Letter Day.**

Selina Lock

GET YOUR FACTS RIGHT

PORTRAYING foreign cultures can be a tricky thing. Take the recent storyline in **Captain America** by Dan Jurgens that was set in Russia. We know it's Russia because there are tractors. The villains mince about like they're auditioning for the cut scenes in Time Crisis, spouting such drivel as "Nyet. You are going to Hell, where you belong, Capitalist", while the locals look on in awe crying: "He is America, Papa. America."



Just once it would be nice to see some Europeans in a Marvel comic that aren't poor peasant farmers who secretly harbour the desire to be American.

Then there's the final clincher. Nick Fury saves the day with a witty shout of "When am I ever gonna remember that ya gotta drive on the left side o' the road overseas?"

For your information, Mr. Jurgens, there are over 100 countries in the world and only 42 of them drive on the left. Russia isn't one of them. It took me one minute and twelve seconds to confirm this on the internet. This is known as "research". *Andy Gart*

"Just once it would be nice to see some Europeans in a Marvel comic that aren't poor peasant farmers"

YOUR COMICS HOROSCOPE?

Do you fit the comics horoscope profile?

Aries: You like characters that start off as sidekicks and then turn on their mentors.
Taurus: As far as you're concerned there isn't a comic worthy of your attention.
Gemini: You're always in two minds whether to buy *The Sandman* or *JLA*!
Cancer: There is a reluctance to get out of the bath until you've finished the entire miniseries.
Pisces: You like comics that have guest appearances by cod, but not plaice.
Aquarius: You are a control freak – you bought your comic shop because it didn't stock Eros comix. You think you're wonderful – but...
Capricorn: They're not comicbooks, they're graphic novels!
Sagittarius: The large brown holdall contains a complete set of *Spider-Man Comics Weekly*.
Libra: You consider Kurt Busiek a class above all else in comicbook writing.
Leo: Today you will produce the 231st issue of your small press title *My life is Shite*. Your partner will tell you how wonderful you are.
Virgo: That bloke. The one in the anorak, standing at the back of the shop. That's you, that is...
Scorpio: At the age of 7 you deemed comics not worthy, you will marry a Taurus.

Breaking down the 4th Wall

Comics Graphic Novels
Fandom Comment
Discussion

VOX POPULI

Jared Myland
Manager
Forbidden Planet
Leeds, West Yorks.

"IT'S easy to sell comics at the moment because there are so many good ones about.

Our top seller, **X-Men**, more than doubled its sales with the first issue by Morrison & Quitely. Sales of the other X-titles also increased. Other strong sellers are **Green Arrow**, **JLA**, **Avengers**, **Rising Stars**, **Ministry of Space**, and any Alan Moore stuff. I recommend all the above to customers, and also **Brotherhood**, **Daredevil**, **Powers**, **Hellboy**, **From Hell**, and the Marvel Ultimates. I even sell **Authority**, **Planetary**, and the **Stormwatch** TPBs with a money back guarantee, and no one has asked for a refund.

We give comics a shelf life of at least six to eight weeks, and keep a large stock of trade paperbacks, including manga, independents, and superhero/adventure stuff. We promote selected items, such as the new **Bizarro Comics** book, by selling them below the recommended price to give the best value in town.

I think the distributors should help promote comics by offering percentage returns on new titles, whose sales are difficult to predict. This would encourage retailers to get more comics in the shops for people to choose from.Everybody should have just as many comics and graphic novels as they do books, DVDs, and videos. Comics are just as valid and diverse a storytelling medium as any other, and I will not rest until everyone knows it."

"RICHARD "Dutch" McManus (Age 19 – Been reading comics for, like, 15 years, man!) says: 'There's no such thing as a free meal, sometimes a banana is just a banana, and if God has a face, it will look like Harrison Ford's.'

At the moment I'm buying anything from Marvel: all the major X-titles, Spidey titles, **Punisher**, **Daredevil**, etc. I like my mainstream! I also buy **Green Arrow**, because of Kevin Smith, although I prefer his movies and movie related comic work (**Clerks**, **Jay & Silent Bob**, etc.) to his superhero stuff.

I have been collecting Spidey and X-titles since before I could read. I follow characters more than any particular writers or artists, although I do have my favourites. John Romita, Jr is one of the greatest storytellers of this or any generation in my opinion. But I do *NOT* recommend **Ultimate Spider-Man**; I cannot understand why everyone is raving about it! It seems sad to me that an entire generation is going to read this version instead of the 'real' one, but what else can I expect from Marvel now? I don't think Joe Quesada can climb any further up Bendis's ass (though for God's sake, you know he's gonna try).

The one thing I'd really like to see is another issue of **Migraine Boy** by Greg Fiering! The two issues published by Slave Labor Graphics stand as my all-time favourite pieces of modern literature. Track them down if you can. You won't regret it."

Richard "Dutch"
McManus
Customer of
Forbidden Planet
Leeds, West Yorks.

MILESTONES

BEGINNINGS

THIS column will be taking a monthly look at old comics. As should be clear from this issue's illustration, that doesn't just mean American Golden Age, Silver Age and Bronze Age comicbooks: it also means that aspects of the history and prehistory of comics over a period of many centuries will be examined.

The column will also adopt a slightly different strategy from most fan-oriented approaches to the medium's past.

Perhaps because historical research among fans began in the 1960s – with an aim, of identifying the artists of old comics and why some artists were "better" than others, which demanded technical analysis of *how* comics worked – much research during the last forty years has looked for origins according to degree of resemblance to modern comics. The scholars of the 1970s identified R.F. Outcault's 1896 character *The Yellow Kid* as a point of origin largely because Outcault introduced text into the panels, as dialogue placed within speech balloons.

More recently, many students have paid close attention to the albums produced by the Swiss teacher Rodolphe Toepffer between 1827 and 1846, partly on the grounds that his use of caricature to convey character, his complex plots and the indivisibility of text and image in his work are characteristic of later comics.

Scott McCloud has widened the scope of research by suggesting the basic formula "comics = sequential art" – but still the search for early comics often depends on how much any examples conform to a modern consensus view of what a comic is.

I'll be considering aspects of that approach in this column in future. However, I'll also be adding some extra elements to the historical mix which have less to do with the current form of comics: a consideration of the medium as a product of popular culture, and an examination of images which may contain some of the characteristics of comics but not all of them.

The underlying theory behind this is that comics have been in a constant state of development for a very long time. Fast and frequent stages have occurred during the last 150 years but there was a very slow, gradual evolution before then, noticeably taking place ever since the invention of printing but, I would argue, perceptible even before that.

Slow development, with a tendency towards repetition of forms and very gradual acceptance of new ideas, is one of the historical characteristics of popular culture. Because the 20th century saw some breakdown of the traditional divisions between the "high" and the "low" in art, such characteristics may be less obvious today, yet in some respects they remain in place.

For instance, for all the changes to the medium in the last 100 years, comics – especially in Britain and the USA – have mostly continued to be cheap booklets published serially and dealing with the subjects and genres of "pulp fiction", much like the "chapbook" stories sold on streets and at markets throughout Europe ever since the invention of printing in the fifteenth century.

That's enough of a mission statement for now. Let's turn to an example of what I've been writing about.

The image on this page first appeared on the frontispiece to a 1616 edition of Thomas Kyd's play *The Spanish Tragedy*.

Jacobean drama is nowadays seen as a literary species of "high" art. In the seventeenth century, though, it was regarded as a "low", popular medium, far removed from the high literary values of verse and belles-lettres. Kyd's highly successful and often reprinted play it remained one of the most popular of English plays for some fifty years after its first performance – may thus be considered the equivalent of, say, a Stephen King bestseller, and this illustration to it may be taken as an example of a popular image.

The use of speech balloons is plain enough: the speech balloon had existed since the Middle Ages, and one of the unanswered questions of comics history is just why they were not combined with clear sequences of images until the end of the nineteenth century. And since it is generally held that a comic must consist of a clear sequence of images, the fact that this is a single image may seem to militate against the possibility of

it being a comic.

However, an examination of Kyd's play reveals that this single image actually conflates two images, to convey a sequence of two separate events within the drama.

To the right of it the play's main character, Hieronimo, discovers the dead body of his son and speaks a contraction of a line from Act 2 Scene 5 of the play. To the left the heroine, Bel-Imperia, struggles with a masked man – their speech balloons contain contractions of Act 2 Scene 4 lines 62 and 63. The anonymous woodcut artist of this image has isolated a key action sequence and illustrated it in sequential form.

The result may not be a comic in the modern sense – contrary to modern custom the sequence reads from right to left, and the division between the two events is not clarified by use of a panel border, although the artist does indicate such a division by the device of turning the two main characters' backs to each other, so that the two halves of the image appear to be flowing in opposite directions. However I think this image does begin to demonstrate how certain of the medium's techniques were being employed long before the commonly identified beginnings of comics.

To emphasise a point about popular culture made earlier, the *content* rather than the technique of the image fits with that of the modern comic rather well. What modern reader of comics is not familiar with the concepts of hero, heroine, violence and sudden death? Formats and methods may change, but for many centuries tastes have remained largely the same!

In future issues I'll be examining many such images from the past for evidence of the long, slow development of the comics medium.

I'll even be examining 20th century comics sometimes!

Mike Kidson has been writing about all kinds of comics for rather a long time, and still enjoys it greatly! Recently he's presented papers on aspects of the medium's history at the Angouleme Symposiom 2001 and the Glasgow International BD Conference, and he's currently working on a detailed historical account of girls' comics In Britain.

LEARNING CURVES

Pond life

IT'S NO secret that over the last 20 years Britain has strived to Americanize itself more and more.

It's got to the point where it feels like we were the colony and not the other way round. After all, we get everything they get, but we have to wait longer for it. Films, TV programmes, we even get our comics a whole day later. Topping that, Americans can get back issues that are cheaper!

For instance, the Art Adams drawn **Longshot** miniseries *(Marvel Comics)* will set you back about £5 per issue. 20 years since its release, the first appearance of Longshot with X-Men villains Mojo & Spiral is still a sought-after series. However, a reliable source tells me that on the other side of The Pond this is the sort of thing you can easily find in the bargain bins.

So while our American cousins can pick up the six issues for just a few dollars, I've already parted with roughly £30. Since then I've asked at various marts why they cost so much. The feeble excuse fed to me by the chauvinistic peddlers is that it's from the early eighties when it cost more to import American comics... D'uh?

Likewise, it seems that titles like David Mack's **Kabuki: Circle of Blood** *(Caliber Press)* and the first dozen issues of Hiroaki Samura's **Blade of the Immortal** *(Dark Horse)* are almost impossible to find. And when I do find them, they're outrageously priced. So I've been forced to turn to the Internet to help me get my fix but, with the added cost of shipping and the exchange rate on top of the final auction price, I've paid up to $30 for those elusive first four issues of beautiful yet brutal samurai period manga. And to add insult to injury the original price sticker was left on – $5 for the lot.

But every now and then life in Britain's a pretty good thing after all. Obviously, there's the infamous **Elseworlds 80-Page Giant** *(DC Comics)*. By now everyone knows how and why it was meant to be pulped on the day before it was due for release, but a quantity made it to these humble shores. Two words spring to mind, 'eBay' and 'ker-ching'.

I remember when it came out I saw it on the shelf in my local comic shop and, fool that I am, actually decided not to get it because it didn't look that good. If I'd known that they'd be going for anything between £50 and £140 I would have bought the whole shelf – it's lucky I'm not a financial advisor.

Then there are those wonderful old Marvel UK titles that have become so incredibly popular – **Transformers** and **Captain Britain**. The former is currently booming in popularity and has been for the past few years.

Marvel UK's **Transformers** ran from late 1984 to early 1992 with an impressive 332 issues. Although it began as a way to reprint the US stories, the UK back-up stories soon came into their own. Written by Simon Furman and drawn by a great selection of British artists – including Mike Collins and Geoff Senior – the stories were darker and grittier than the originals. More than just sci-fi with big robots, characters were often caught in life or death situations. Minds were played with, personalities twisted and expanded upon, and much loved characters killed off. It was a more British outlook on the genre that was original, fresh, and completely different from anything to have previously hit the American market of 1980s toy merchandising spin-offs.

Then there's **Captain Britain**. It's possible to make a weak argument that the popularity of this character is to do with his connections to the X-Men – twin brother of Psylocke, and long time member of Excalibur with Shadowcat and Nightcrawler. However, it seems more of a case of the creators than the characters involved – namely the Alans, Davis and Moore. There's no doubt that these two Northamptonshire-based creators have risen to popularity all over the globe.

Their work for 'The Big Two' – including Davis' **JLA: The Nail** and of course Moore's **Watchmen** – can all fetch high prices. But it's their earlier work on Marvel UK's flagship character that stands out.

Captain Britain was only ever released in England, but most of the characters featured made their way over to the mainstream American Marvel titles. That's quite a feat in itself, but hardly surprising when you consider the quality of what was being produced. Marvel UK dared to bring a whole new depth to the superhero genre. The British Captain had incredible power, but was flawed by his own selfishness and thuggish narrow-mindedness. A far cry from Marvel and DC's usual stock of god-like superheroes.

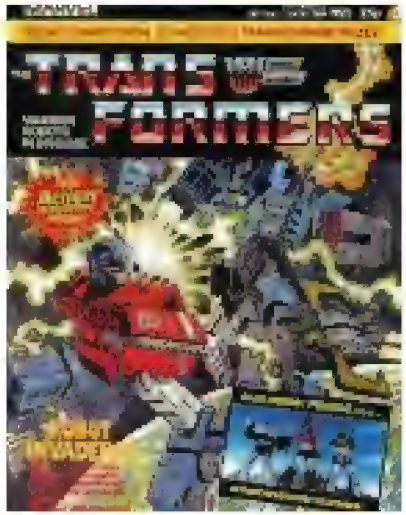
Problems with sales meant Marvel UK was forced to cancel **Captain Britain**'s own series and merge him with their various compendiums including **The Daredevils** and **Mighty World of Marvel**. The prices for both have, unsurprisingly, risen. For what was originally 25p for giant robots, you can now expect to pay over ten times the price, while you can potentially part with 50 times the 10p cover price for Britain's answer to Steve Rogers.

On its own that doesn't sound too impressive, but with so many issues of both series and the added price of selling them overseas, the costs soon mount up. Where does this leave things in the Transatlantic stakes? Well, it's extremely unlikely that there will be a repeat of the *Elseworlds* phenomenon in the next decade or more. So in the meantime it looks like both nations will be exploiting the power of Internet auctions.

Sarah Littlehales

The Sure Thing

Transformers (UK) #1: *If you see copies of this floating around at comic conventions or marts, then the buzz hasn't reached your neighbourhood yet... Provided the price is right... under £5 (or $8) you should invest wisely, young comics Jedi...!*



CONTINENTAL DRIFT

THE FRANCO-BELGIAN SCENE

SEEKING historical content and themes in American mainstream titles is often futile at best. The odd visit to the Negative Zone – flintlock rifles vs. plasma guns – what a blast – and references to Nordic gods are usually all one could hope for.

The seriously interested reader has to turn away from the ever increasing multitude of spandex offered and resort to mainland Europe, where historical adventure epics have a long standing tradition.

After the commercial and critical success of **Les Passagers du Vent/ Travellers with the Wind** by Francois Bourgeon, 1985 saw the debut of Vcu, a comic magazine that ran stories with exclusively historical themes.

One of its most prolific authors was Hermann who had just published the first instalment of his grand epic, **Les Tours de Bois-Maury**, the previous year. In the first volume of the series, *Babette*, Hermann parallels the lives of Aymar the knight and the bricklayer Germain. The latter has a secret love affair with Babette – a peasant's daughter whom he rescues from an impending rape committed by a nobleman. The affair is discovered and Germain is sentenced for his impudence and thrown into the dungeon of the local castle. Aymar hears of his story and frees him from incarceration by overpowering another knight in a superbly visualized tournament. When Germain returns to his village he soon realises that he has fallen through the cracks, losing his employment and his lover.

Hermann has managed to create a believable portrayal of medieval France in the pages of a comicbook. The narrative structure is embedded with accurately researched surroundings and peasant life is depicted in amazing detail. Working in the fields, bricklaying on a construction site of a cathedral, herding pigs, or washing cloth in a river – the daily life of the peasants is marked out by work for their lords. The farmers wear simple clothes, usually only trousers or the most important piece of clothing in the Middle Ages – the tunic. This basic garment for men was often complemented by long socks wrapped with string. The comic's colourisation and detailed texture show the distinction between the heavy woollen cloth worn by the peasants and the nobles' finer woven garments.

However, work and appearance does not constitute the only sharp separation between peasants and lords.

When interacting with nobility the farmers display a constant obsequiousness which is portrayed by crouching and fearful looks and always keeping a certain distance from the armed knights on horseback. They were right to do so as nobles were raised with a sense of self-esteem which inured them against any self-doubt, prompting them to aggressive reactions to the slightest insults.

In Babette, this attitude is personified in the knight Geoffroy who throws Germain into the dungeon for having killed his brother. Germain does not stand trial, yet none of the other nobles question Geoffroy's decision – the ruler's motivation is the absolute power over his subjects, he has to decide their fate.

The medieval concept of potens and pauper comes into play here. The mighty exercise power over the poor, yet at the same time the poor are not defined by their monetary status, rather by their access to power – a definition that does not allow for a change of status.

Aymar and Germain are acting in the framework of their personal possibilities, their social heritage and references. Their actions do not seem contrived and neither does their integration into the overall narrative framework.

The knight frees the bricklayer from prison and he does so on the grounds of a morally superior stand to those of his peers, yet it is not in his interest to follow Germain's further exploits.

The thought that it could be an advantage not to kill a peasant for a crime he did not commit or a slight insult rounds out the character. However it does not make him a freedom fighter for the oppressed classes – the roles are designated and absolute. Everyday life in the Middle Ages consisted of work, meals and sporadic moments of conversation and entertainment. All that is portrayed in **Les Tours de Bois-Maury** and Hermann certainly makes an effort. The narration evolves in a stage-set of wooden dishes, stray dogs, straw baskets, performing tumblers, clay pottery, thatched roofs, muddy roads, bad teeth and pockmarks.

This high standard of detailed illustration gives the comic an authenticity seldom found in other works. Hermann succeeds in the depiction of medieval life on the basis of historical research as opposed to other author's literary interpretations which often succumb to fantastic and polemic misrepresentations.

Babette is not the stuff of Arthurian legend but rather a hard and fitting portrayal of stratified society in feudal systems and the people bound to its rules.

Kevin Schomburg

Right: With its huge amount of well researched detail Hermann's depiction of medieval life reaches a high level of historic authenticity.

(Babette is the first instalment of the series Les Tours de Bois-Maury by Hermann. Volume 12 is solicited for September 2001 by the French publisher Glenat. Selected other works by Hermann include the science-fiction series Jeremiah, the western series Comanche and Blood Ties, a hardcover album published by Dark Horse.)

Head2Head

Two Millers Talking Frankly

Steve Miller:

I'M dreading the new *Spider-Man* film. Every superhero film faces a problem in translation – what looks good in comics doesn't look good on the screen. The film can have directorial style abundant and a plot concentrating on character rather than adventure, but there will still be a fundamental flaw. A superhero film is going to involve a character who dresses up in tights to fight crime and if I, an avowed keeper of the superhero faith, cringe every time I see this, heaven only knows what the general public make of it.

Superheroes in film only serve to reinforce people's prejudices about comic books, that they're juvenile and silly. I fully expect another wave of such ridicule when *Spider-Man* is released and – even if the script leans towards Moore rather than Mackie and the playing is worthy of an Oscar – the criticism will be justified. You cannot suspend your disbelief when faced with a man in red and blue tights.

Even superhero films that succeed on some level have to make sacrifices on others, often resulting in a product with significant handicaps. *Superman* sought to accentuate the wonder of the man from Krypton, but the rest of the film comes across as interminably mundane, and the franchise soon collapsed into pastiche.

The RKO serials got away with their shortcomings simply because the audiences in the 30s and 40s weren't as sophisticated or demanding as they are today, and ate up any old adventure serial, regardless of quality. *Superman* and the RKO serials are partially successful examples, but they are between 20 and 70 years old. The audience for movies has since moved on and they've left superheroes behind.

I think *Batman* and *X-Men* show that the studios recognise the problems of comic-book films. 1989's *Batman* lurks in the shadows for large periods and is best remembered not as a superhero film but as a Burton film, his imagination and influences evident in the imaginative set pieces and the vertigo-inspired climax. Unfortunately, it suffers from Burton's main fault of collapsing into narrative incoherence long before the end.

The battle to make *X-Men* respectable saw the studio hire a hotshot director and big name stars, try to hide the spandex, and emphasise the story's allegorical aspects. Again, it was partially successful – because Singer realises that today's audiences want action, explosions and special effects. But the film's unsure what tone it should be aiming at and tries to be all things to all people. Ultimately it falls short of being either a memorable summer blockbuster or a faithful adaptation of the original.

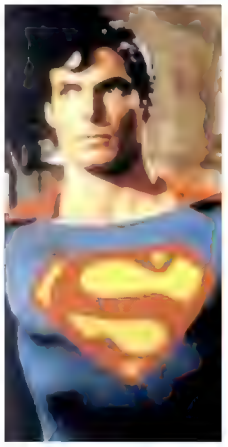
In the infancy of the new century, unless Hollywood can throw off its reliance on source material from decades ago, the superhero film is as good as dead.

Head2Head

Simon Miller:

I'M looking forward to the *Spider-Man* film – then again I look forward to cheesy films like *Justice League of America* as well – because of the excitement of seeing a favourite hero on screen.

Do you remember the sense of anticipation when you saw the Superman poster proclaiming that "You will believe a man can fly!" and heard the opening chords of the Superman theme tune? I bet you weren't worried that it was just a bloke in tights. The heartbeat drum as Christopher Reed pulled apart his shirt to reveal the S on his chest for the first time sent a frisson of excitement through cinema goers – children and adults alike – as Superman went to work. Not bad for a "character who dresses up in tights to fight crime".



Superheroes by their very nature are about improbable people with impossible powers fighting ludicrous villains in imaginative stories. With this type of film there is a tacit agreement between the film maker and the audience concerning a suspension of disbelief.

RKO knew how to get an audience going back in the 30s and 40s with *King of the Rocket Men* and *Flash Gordon*. Did they care about the whole concept of how Dr King looked, or that his butt would actually get roasted by his rocket pack every time he used it? What about the very visible string on Flash Gordon's rocket ship and that no matter where they were meant to be landing it was always in the mountains? Of course not, audiences wanted to be thrilled by these comic capers and they still do. I don't believe that imagination has gone.

Superhero movies rely on a belief in a world no matter how good the effects are. Yes, there *is* a "wow" factor but the story still has to be believable. *Doctor Who* survived until the 80s on a tiny budget because of the world it constructed, while *Gormenghast* went down the pan because the audience didn't believe in it despite a huge budget. *Batman* and *X-Men* succeeded because of that belief.

A lot of comics fans complain that *Batman* was more of a Tim Burton film than a Batman film but the punters on the street would not recognise a "Tim Burton" film if it came up in its full gothic whimsy and punched them in the mouth. What they saw was not the comfortable cheesy "kapow" Batman and Robin they knew but the Dark Knight that we comic readers recognised.

As for the directorial competence of Singer, well that's a matter of taste. However, *X-Men* was almost universally praised by the mainstream press, which happily accepted its origins as a comic book. The allegorical aspects were praised and as they are the foundation stone of the X-Men – because it gave Marvel a way of exploring racism – so the allegories were always going to be the basis of the film.

Comic books were the inspiration behind both *The Matrix* and *Unbreakable*, and with *Spider-Man* out soon and more than fifteen comic-based films in development, the "dead" superhero film is looking quite healthy. Not bad for some men in tights.

Images:
Batman & Robin *logo; Peter & Mary Jane from* Spider-Man*; Christopher Reeve; Alex Ross* Spider-Man *design and* Batman Animated.

MAN ON A MISSION

BETTER COMICS – mark those two words, they're the guiding force behind whatever appears in this space. They're the aim of the Mission.

That aim is simple – comics we can be proud of, comics their creators are proud of and comics that stand against the best of any other medium.

Month by month, just like one of those partworks that build into a big pile of old magazines and strangely-shaped pieces of balsawood, Man on a Mission's going to look at a different aspect of comics – a specific publication, a specific creator or just whatever the hell has caught my eye – and we're going to tell it where it's going wrong.

And we're going to start with You.

You read comics right? Maybe collect a few regular titles? We'll get back to you at a later date. Possibly have ideas of being a creator yourself? Well, if you do have any ambitions whatsoever of being a comics creator, do this one thing for me. Ready?

If you write, take whatever you consider to be your best work and show it to a professional writer. If you're an artist, do the same with a professional artist. They don't have to work in comics. Note, though, the word 'professional' – not your mates in the APA, not the bloke who's drawing your strip – professional. Somebody who does it for a living.

Then when the professional has read it, ask him or her for an honest, unrestrained opinion. Listen carefully to what they say. And if that professional gives you anything except the highest possible praise or the most effusive of encouragements, take your keyboard or your drawing board, throw it into the nearest large body of water and swear never ever to pick up a pen or a brush again.

I can already hear an intake of breath from a section of the audience. "Oooooh" they're saying, "that's a bit harsh!" No, it isn't. What this thing called comics needs – apart from a decent name, but better men than I have failed – is ability.

There just isn't enough talent about and what is about is being spread pretty thin. What this thing called comics doesn't need is another not very good self-styled writer or artist knocking up, say, a cheapo website or a crappy small press book and then - through a mixture of misguided self-belief and relentless self-publicity – claiming to be professional creators. What this thing called comics needs even less is for those people to then osmose their way into the tall glass we call professionals and dilute the orange squash of ability until all that's left is something that has no taste and looks like urine.

I am not, let me make it plain, criticising the quirky or the bizarre, or those whose work simply falls outside the general expectation of a comic. If the basic four-colour pamphlet isn't your chosen field, then more power to you. If a creator has that rare spark that makes their work vital and exciting, then I don't give a flying one what format the work's in or what it looks like.

However, if your field is hackwork, cynical exploitation or anything at all that is second-rate, then I am going to find out about it. Then I am going to hunt you down and I am going to kill you. Metaphorically, of course. Unless.

Next Issue: You. Again. *MartinShipp*

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Stanley's Soapbox

IGNORANCE talking: but being armed with little information when faced with writing a column is a dangerous thing, especially when talking about Marvel's new **Bloodstone** series. You remember Bloodstone – truly dreadful back-up strip in **Rampaging Hulk** (the '70s magazine not the colour comic) after starring in **Marvel Presents**? Eventually ending up being written by John Warner (best known for being Mrs Warner's little boy) and drawn by a number of people including the interestingly named (but at least talented) Rudy Nebres, Bloodstone disappeared without trace until Mark Gruenwald resurrected him for a naff Captain America storyline.

Apparently, Ullyses Bloodstone is no more and he's been replaced by his gun-toting monster hunting, Buffy-the-Vampire-cloned daughter, complete with platinum blonde hair, see-through slacks, thick surgical suspenders and a heavily under-wired bra. The problem, however good this might be (I said *might*), is there is little or no evidence that female superheroes – unless their name is Diana Prince – have any long lasting appeal, unless they have their comedy-sized boobs hanging out or their arse cleavage showing... Oh yeah... *Stan*

THE VERDICT
COMICS REVIEWS

THIS MONTH'S JURY:

Rob Cave
Andy Grant
Kelvin Green
Rol Hirst
Mike Kidson
Sarah Littlehales
Nigel Lowry
David McLintock
John Parkinson
Kevin Schomburg
Mike Sivier
Chris Spicer
Andy Winter

Would you like to join our reviews team – The Borderline Psychotics? All you have to do is send a sample of two reviews to Andy Winter: reviews@borderline.mediahall.co.uk and he'll get in touch!

Amazing Spider-Man #33
Marvel
J. Michael Straczynski and John Romita, Jr

JMS wins the award for best superhero fistfight of the month, with an epic struggle between the webslinger and new foe Morlun.

The characterization of Spidey is spot-on – he hasn't been written this well in years. "Web-shooters! Can't get to my web-shooters!" Spidey panics as Morlun launches them both off the top of a building while gripping his foe's wrists. And when Morlun threatens members of the public, Peter shows his inner strength: "Damn him, he knows exactly what it takes to pull me in again. I won't let an innocent be hurt." And his inner weaknesses: "But I'm an innocent too, aren't I? What did I do... that I should die like this?"

There is real tension here and a sense of desperation unheard of in long-underwear tales for too long a time. The reader is offered the genuine suspicion that maybe, just maybe, our hero might not make it out alive this time.

The Verdict: Superior Spider-Man. If you can find it, enjoy it! (MS)

Amelia Rules! #1
Renaissance Press
By Jimmy Gownley

Amelia, a young girl with a penchant for fourth-walling, has recently survived a divorce. So begins the newest star in the firmament of independent comics. This is basically a book about kids having adventures, but there's something about it that speaks with an equally strong voice to the adult in me.

Throw some inspired colouring into the mix, and you've got a comic that I find it hard to imagine anyone not liking.

If you want a comic that tells childhood like it is – if you want to fondly remember your youth while being secretly glad that you don't have to relive it – or if you want to find out what a 'sneeze-barf' is – then this is the book for you.

If there's any justice in the world, this comic will be a phenomenal success.

The Verdict: A stunning debut that not only captures the magical wonder of childhood, but also the appalling powerlessness. (AG)

Cerebus #268
Aardvark-Vanaheim
By Dave Sim and Gerhard

After a two-issue prologue, the final story arc in Cerebus's 300-issue run begins with the aardvark using his 'winnings' from the game of five-bar gate to open up a strip joint in the heart of matriarchal fascist territory. He hopes to get himself killed.

The story itself continues the title's recent return to comedy, but this time Sim turns from the kind of biting satire of which he is an acknowledged master to rather disappointing Three-Stooges-style slapstick. While Sim's infamous misogyny has now even begun to encroach from the letters page and (sometimes exhaustive) 'sleeve notes' into the strip itself, Cerebus is still eminently readable. In fact, it holds the same kind of morbid fascination as a car crash, with readers captivated, wondering just what he'll do next.

The Verdict: A slow story that, aside from some unrewarding slapstick, is pretty much impenetrable for new readers. (RC)

Daredevil #19
Marvel Knights
By Brian Michael Bendis and David Mack

EXTRAORDINARY. This issue completes the Wake Up story arc about child abuse. It's a happy ending of sorts, although, like most things in the real world, the dividing line between good and bad is blurred.

The storyline has been very powerful, looking at Daredevil's world from a character-based, rather than action-based, point of view; complemented by artwork which mirrors the psyches of the players.

But the most extraordinary aspect of this comic was the moving letter from a person who was abused as a child, which the book's editors printed uncut - a brave move, considering the usual state of Marvel letters pages.

The Verdict: A story about people, rather than spandex-clad stereotypes. One to be savoured. (MS)

Dirty Pair: Sim Hell Remastered #3
Dark Horse
By Adam Warren

KEI and Yuri meet the person responsible for stranding them within a virtual reality network, but that knowledge doesn't help any as they are still forced to run a gauntlet of bizarre simulated realities.

Although Warren's figures are stockier here than they are now, this eight-year-old mini shows how advanced it was (despite its unashamed juvenile mentality) by being able to successfully stand alongside most current comics visually, while also appearing contemporary due to its early but heavy manga influence.

The Verdict: Manic manga mayhem made many moons ago but with a modern mentality. (NL)

Elektra #1
Marvel Knights
By Brian Michael Bendis and Chuck Austen

Greg Horn's painted cover looks quite nice until you realize the book's, ahem, titular heroine has something a bit weird going on in the mammary department. The poor woman's boobs just kind of loll there: enormous, shapeless and patently ridiculous, as if someone had come along and squished two generous handfuls of Play-Doh to her chest as a prank. Horn clearly needs a girlfriend, either that or some better anatomy references.

An inability to draw breasts certainly isn't a criticism you could level at the book's interior artist, Chuck Austen. His self-published, adult comic series,

THE VERDICT

Strips, contained more bare flesh than a saucy Saturday night in Sodom. It's a shame he doesn't bring the vibrant, iconic qualities of that book to bear here, opting instead for a supposedly more realistic, painted style that's stiff, graceless and ugly. If that isn't bad enough, he uses an irritating 'soft focus' wash effect throughout, making every panel look as if it's being viewed through a film of dust.

Perhaps the former Miracleman artist shouldn't be judged too harshly, however. After all, having to follow Frank Miller and Bill Sienkiewicz's superlative work on this character is as daunting as it gets. But merely attempting to ape what has gone before does no one any favours, particularly Austen himself, who comes across as a poor copyist with nothing to add to the character or her world.

Story-wise this sees Elektra travelling to Iraq to assassinate some beardy Saddam-a-like for S.H.I.E.L.D. and a big stack of cash. Hydra gets involved, there's a generous helping of the old ultra-violence, and a pretty shocking finale. All in all though, this lacks the usual Bendis inventiveness: the action seems a little forced when it finally arrives, and a framing device has been clumsily tacked on to the front of the story to explain what has gone before.

The Verdict: A disappointing rehash rather than a radical re-invention of Frank Miller's best-loved character. (AW)

Fantastic Four #45
Marvel
By Carlos Pacheco, Jeph Loeb and Jeff Johnson

AS Johnny struggles to come to terms with his permanently aflame state, the now human Ben Grimm makes a trip to see his former love, Alicia Masters. But wherever she goes, you know a certain villain can't be far behind.

Johnson does a pleasing job of filling in for Pacheco on the art front, but the story is hardly surprising with a telegraphed hint about the mystery villain. What saves this issue is the scene between Ben and Alicia over the last three pages, and it's moments like these that are getting fans loving this series again.

The Verdict: Not as good as previous issues, but still the best FF for years. (NL)

Fray #2
Dark Horse
By Joss Whedon, Karl Moline & Andy Owens

The Slayer of the future meets her Watcher and encounters vampires for the first time, before finally consenting to take on board the knowledge her unwanted mentor is keen to impart.

Whedon proves he's as comfortable a comics scripter as he is a screenwriter and, with the payoff to issue #1's cliffhanger, displays a skill for playing with reader's expectations that is sadly lacking from most other comics.

Ryan Sook aside, all the Buffyverse artists have been highly forgettable, but here Moline and Owens's smooth art soars with strong fluid lines and dynamic layouts.

The Verdict: A rare TV tie-in that actually reflects its origins, while still standing on its own able legs. (NL)

Hunter: The Age of Magic #1
DC/Vertigo
By Dylan Horrocks and Richard Case

All those that followed Timothy Hunter's exploits in the **Books of Magic** ongoing series will find this extremely disappointing, not to mention confusing.

For a start the art is awful; Richard Case's grasp of human anatomy is substandard, his storytelling weak and his action scenes unspectacular. Such poor visuals would be bearable, as long as the story itself was at least entertaining. But, sad to say, Horrocks isn't off to a good start here. The sparse hair on his chin suggests Tim has grown up, but his unsympathetic demeanour suggests otherwise.

Where the original miniseries, The Books of Magic by Neil Gaiman, was about the innocence of a boy who learned that one day he would become the most powerful mage alive, the ongoing series dealt with the conflict of using magic for your own gain, and the responsibility of doing the right thing. It dealt with the knowledge of Tim's heritage and his future, and his progression in realizing who he was and where he belonged. At the end of The Books of Magic Tim Hunter had prevailed over his inner and his literal demons, knew what life expected of him and seemed set to face it with a real maturity. This progression took 75 issues, but here his move into young adulthood is quickly wrapped up in barely one issue.

Hunter: The Age of Magic is caption-free with one exception. The decision to include six pages of dialogue-free action with no captions whatsoever is hardly suitable for the character-driven stories about Tim that readers are used to. **The Books of Magic** was carried by diary entries from all its main players, a stylistic way of offering insight into a character's psyche. It is one thing not to use that any longer (people do stop writing diaries as they grow up), but it is quite another to replace it with badly conceived action sequences.

The dialogue is weak and Tim's cursing merely adds to the feeling that this book has moved too far away from its roots. Simply put, Horrocks tells an average fantasy tale, which doesn't deserve a protagonist with such a rich and colourful history; its flimsy plot (Tim meets and helps a girl imperilled by a band of Skin Eaters) and misuse of a much-liked character ultimately made me quite angry.

Those readers who haven't followed Tim's intermediate adventures in the recent miniseries, The Names of Magic, will have trouble identifying any of the characters and places in this issue, but sadly, so will those who have. Horrocks has included an explanatory page in the back of the book, apparently a speciality of his to excuse his incomplete writing skills. Quite why Vertigo decided to cancel the old series and replace it with this inferior version I can't imagine.

The Verdict: A major disappointment in desperate need of improvement. (KS)

Just a Pilgrim #5
Black Bull
By Garth Ennis and Carlos Ezquerra
Punisher #2
Marvel
By Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon

Maybe he's just demob happy after finally laying Preacher and Hitman to rest (literally, in the latter's case), but most of Ennis's writing since concluding those two bravura projects has been about as edifying as waking up one morning to discover the Queen Mum completely starkers beside you in bed. Ennis is coasting, and if you want proof it's here by the bucket-load.

Just a Pilgrim, of which this is the last part of a five-issue series, sees the Irish scribe indulging his usual predilections for gross-out humour, brutal violence and the Bible. Set against an apocalyptic backdrop in which the sun has dried up earth's oceans, the series invokes *Mad Max*, Sergio Leone and lots of other stuff it really isn't fit to be mentioned in the same breath as.

This concluding episode takes place aboard the wreck of the Titanic, in the

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middle of what used to be the Atlantic Ocean. In keeping with its setting, there's a fair amount of death and destruction as the Pilgrim of our title does battle with Castenado, a blind pirate with hooks for hands and false legs (who's surprisingly good at fighting, despite what you'd imagine to be fairly serious handicaps). Things explode, people die, and precious little of it is engaging in any way. Just Plain Grim.

Punisher is better, but hardly perfect. The limited series that preceded this regular monthly title was frequently laugh-out-loud funny, with its bizarre supporting cast and ridiculous subplots. Unfortunately, given the chance to take the character somewhere new, Ennis has instead decided to re-use old faces and even older tricks. Worse still, he's managed to ratchet up the slapstick quotient another couple of notches, lending the whole enterprise the air of a demented Carry On film.

Spider-Man guest-stars in this issue and Ennis takes the opportunity to deliver a thoroughly post-modern and long overdue kick in the pants to the archetypal superhero team-up. Indeed, the webslinger himself has probably never received such amusingly shoddy treatment at the hands of a writer. Sadly, that inspired touch of iconoclasm aside, this is little more than Ennis-by-numbers, his mixture of irony-filled dialogue, broad comedy and kick-ass violence now surely in danger of becoming more of a cliché than a signature.

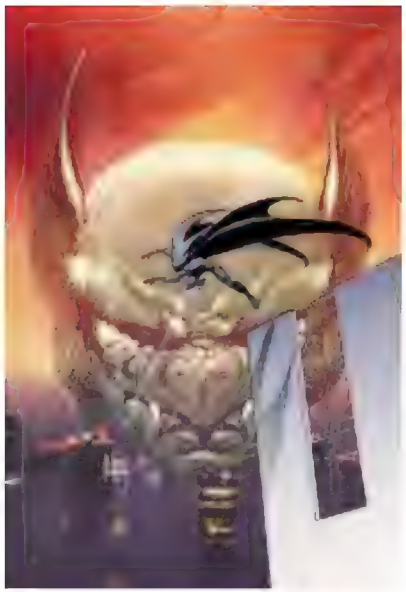
The Verdict: Ennis might be a hot property right now, but his writing has never been more lukewarm. (AW)

Just Imagine Stan Lee's Batman
DC
By Stan Lee and Joe Kubert

Stan Lee's much-trumpeted first DC work debuts here with his retooling of the Batman story. He's joined by comics legend Joe Kubert, whose storytelling may be superb, but his style is very old school. Saying that, Kubert's work here is tighter than more recent efforts and Lee himself surprises with a very understated, sombre scripting style that is totally removed from his bombastic Marvel form.

The plot itself, concerning an honest man framed and sent to prison, where he learns to improve himself before seeking justice upon his release, is fairly straightforward, and while the new version of Batman looks silly, this is not as poor as expected.

The Verdict: A curious mix of old school and modern sensibilities results in a fair but dull effort. (NL)



Liberty Meadows #21
Insight Studios
By Frank Cho

This regular collected edition of the newspaper strip is consistently beautiful and perpetually funny. Cho has perfected his fluid art and writing styles, and has begun to extend his fast-paced three-panel strips into ongoing story lines. The Evil Brandy Saga has begun, bringing with it even more sexy fun, while the regular band of critters provide the usual brand of slapstick comedy.

The Verdict: Proof positive that it's still possible to bring characters to life in just three little panels. (SL)

The Little Endless Storybook
DC/Vertigo
By Jill Thompson

Firstly, this isn't a comic, it's a text story with illustrations. Just so you know.

Secondly, this is very, well, it's very cute.

And there's not much else you can say for it. This isn't the worst Sandman spin-off Vertigo have produced, nor is it the most expensive. If you're a Thompson fan, then the artwork will undoubtedly justify the price of entry – it's very good.

But if you're just a Sandman fan, well, there's just not much of a story going on. And if you're a fan of neither, well, why are you even reading this?

The Verdict: These aren't the dreams you're looking for. You can go about your business. Move along, move along. (AG)

OCTOBRIANA SPECIAL
Alchemy Texts
By John A. Short and others

If any superhero has followed a more varied trajectory than Octobriana I'm unaware of it! From uncertain origins in a Czech commune of the late '60s to appearances in 2000AD and Bryan Talbot's Luther Arkwright epic, but also in the Finnish, British and American small press, John Short's special issue does a fine job of reviewing the history of the world's most famous public domain comics character, while adding to it.

The Verdict: A fine summary of a unique comics heroine. (MK)

Out There #2
Cliffhanger
By Brian Augustyn, Humberto Ramos & Sandra Hope

After the supernatural shenanigans of the high school dance in issue #1, the four young protagonists come together to try to deal with all the weirdness that only they have witnessed. Elsewhere, we learn more about a mysterious pact made by senior townsfolk as they commune with sinister creatures from another reality.

There are obvious comparisons to be made between **Out There** and stuff like *Buffy* and *The Faculty*, but there are worse things to ape and after two issues, this book already far surpasses the creative team's previous series, **Crimson**. Augustyn's plotting is tighter and his characters more defined, while Ramos displays a real flair for the darker scenes – if he would draw less cartoony figures, he could be a respected, as well as popular, artist.

The Verdict: Engaging characters, intriguing plots and able creators make this an enjoyable horror lite. (NL)

Peter Parker: Spider-Man #32
Marvel
By Paul Jenkins and Mark Buckingham

Credit where it's due: Paul Jenkins is definitely improving as a Spider-writer. In this conclusion to Spidey's battle with seemingly unstoppable villain Fusion, he throws in plot-twists aplenty, raising the level of excitement – though more astute readers will have guessed Fusion's secret long ago.

If not the action, then it's the character details that start to win us over; our hero worrying about not being able to feed a neighbour's dog and expressing a strong distaste for carrots. Okay, these are hardly observational gems, but they do bring a little more humanity to the writing.

Jenkins is definitely putting more time, thought and story into each issue now, and Mark Buckingham complements this with strong visuals and a suitably expressive Spidey-mask.

The Verdict: Hardly as revolutionary as the writer and editor might have you believe, but still solid, enjoyable storytelling. (RH)

Petra Etcetera #3
Gratuitous Bunny Comix
By Adrian Kermode and Terry Wiley

A distinctly British take on the relationship-book genre that puts more saccharine US rivals like Strangers in Paradise in the shade. Entirely character-driven (the plot originating from Petra and her kooky-yet-identifiable friends, not to mention their often alcohol-influenced actions), Kermode's script is full of awkwardness, misread signals and cringing embarrassment – just like 'real' life. You will laugh… unless it all hits a little too close to home, in which case you might want to hide your head in shame.

Wiley's art manages to stylishly combine Viz, Manga and Tintin, yet remain as grounded in rude realism as the script requires – except, possibly, in the occasional moments of pure Beano cartooning. Professional indie-book production values lift this book beyond

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its small press roots.
The Verdict: Like looking in the mirror on a particularly heavy morning after – and managing to laugh anyway. (RH)

Pokémon Adventures: Yellow Caballero #3
Viz
By Hidenori Kusaka and Mato (adaptation by Gerard Jones)

The Pokémon Adventures titles take the plot to the game as their foundation. They then spin the most complex tapestries out of that fabric, resulting in the nearest to a game of chess you'll ever see in a comic. Alliances are made, new pokémon and powers are gained, sub-plots are interwoven. Then, just when you think you're reading great stories, suddenly the larger pattern becomes clear to you, and you know you're reading fantastic stories.

In this series, the previous protagonist – Red – has mysteriously vanished after accepting a challenge to a battle in the mountains. What happened? Who is Yellow and who is he working for? Who's on which side anyway? Just who can you trust? These are just some of the questions you'll be pondering as the tapestry is unfurled.

Intrigue, tension, suspense. Oh, and cute fluffy animals. What more could you want from a comic?
The Verdict: If you like stories where it's strategy not might that wins the day, why not give this book a try? (AG)

Promethea #15
America's Best Comics
By Alan Moore, J.H. Williams III & Mick Gray

As Sophie and Barbara, the current and former Prometheas, continue their journey through the Immateria in search of Barbara's lost love, the replacement for Sophie during her absence makes herself known with worrying flashes of a more dangerous psyche.

Williams and Gray turn in their usual excellent and highly detailed artwork, but Moore again discards any attempt at a story in favour of more expository sequences. The scenes with the brand new Promethea work much better, as there is an actual plot structure and characters. This series could work excellently if Moore would drop the preaching and return to storytelling.
The Verdict: A barrage of ideas and little plot results in a frustratingly hollow read. (NL)

Ring Of The Nibelung: Gotterdammerung #1
Dark Horse
By P. Craig Russell

The final act of Wagner's *Ring Cycle* begins, and all the threads carefully woven in the first three books are heading on a collision course. Russell's eye-meltingly gorgeous pencils and dynamic panel design leave no room for doubt – you know you're reading something special.

I hate opera, but I love comics. And this is one of the finest examples of the latter currently being published. Add in a bonus strip exquisite in the sheer elegance of its simplicity, and you've got a comic worth buying a second copy of, just so you've got one on which to drool.

Steer clear of the letters page, though – it's full of the sort of people who could bore the tits off you at a dinner party. And a warning for fans – the final issue of this series takes a jump in both page count and price – you won't want to miss it, so save up now.
The Verdict: A well-layered story, beautifully told. Make no mistake about it, this is Art. (AG)

Scary Godmother #2
Sirius
By Jill Thompson

When the heroes of your stories are scary monsters, then what does that mean for the cuter characters in your fairy-tale world? Well, even the fairest of them all has a dark side, and they don't get much fairer than a fairy! A fairy that has been downtrodden by life, and now only looks out for number one. Or how about a cute little girl whose best friends are skeletons, big bug-eyed monsters, and a witchy looking fairy godmother?

Thompson has a wonderful habit of taking stereotypes and twisting them around, much in the way that traditional fairy tales once did. Most of her characters should be scary monsters, but there's a real innocence about them. We're let into their esoteric world, invited to see them behind the scenes where they're no longer scary. They're just doing their job. Monsters and creatures of the deep are lovable and charming, while the fairies and furry animals are sneaky and conniving, not to be trusted.
The Verdict: The master of children's stories for grown-ups returns. Such fantastic yet simple characterization is wrapped up in its energetic art. (SL)

Smile #6
Tokyopop
By various writers and artists

Tokyopop's **Smile**, a manga anthology for girls, has been serving up a mixed bag of strips for six months now. The flagship strip is *Sailor Moon*, and it's unreadable drivel. This seems largely to be the fault of translator Mika Onishi, who has a strange habit of splitting sentences across speech bubbles. It distracts from what little story there is. Meanwhile, the characters themselves seem content to announce their names, and ask what's happening. This is a movie adaptation, so it may be clearer if you've seen the film, but that's no excuse. At the other end of the spectrum, Clover is a beauty to behold. The creator, Clamp, is a master of the comics form with a strong grasp of negative space. I have no problem comparing this title to Dave McKean's work on **Cages**. Sadly, I'm clearly in the minority, as the letters page is full of letters from young girls praising *Sailor Moon* and saying how boring Clover is.

That's demographics for you. Clover is being dropped in a couple of issues, but is being released in graphic novel form this autumn. I urge you all to seek it out. Smile's other great success story is Mima Ueda's *Peach Girl*. Right up there with the best of British girls' comics, this tale of schoolgirl crushes, rivalry and loyalty will appeal to anyone enjoying **Blue Monday**, and will soon have you hooked.
The Verdict: $4.99 (about £3.70) is a bit steep, considering you'll only enjoy half the comic, but the good strips really are superb. (AG)

Starman #80
DC
By James Robinson & Peter Snejbjerg

James Robinson's story comes to a close at last, as Jack Knight passes on the mantle of Starman to bring up his son instead. Like **Preacher**, this complete story ends on a high note and shows how well projects can turn out without much editorial interference.

Despite the strong visuals provided by Tony Harris and then Snejbjerg, this has always been Robinson's book and here he ties up various plot lines from the entire series with an ease that makes the end of the title less of a loss as it works so well.
The Verdict: A fitting and uplifting

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end to one of the best ever superhero series. (NL)

Strangehaven #13
Abiogenesis Press
By Gary Spencer Millidge

The long-awaited return of Millidge's haunting tale of village life (a very English Twin Peaks, though I'm sure he's tired of that comparison) offers a welcome recap for new readers and those regulars who can't remember as far back as #12. Schoolteacher Alex surrenders the spotlight to copper Kent, now investigating two mysterious deaths, and the possible involvement of the local secret society. It's a very plot-focused return, but not at the expense of the fiercely individual characters populating the weird world of **Strangehaven**, or the offbeat-yet-conversational dialogue that always drags you in. Millidge's art has evolved, too, no longer relying on rigid nine panel layouts, and making more use of a delightful watercolour shading technique.

The Verdict: Imagine The Archers crossed with The Prisoner and you're nowhere near – impossible to recommend this highly enough. (RH)

2000AD #1243-1249:
A Love Like Blood
Rebellion
By John Smith and Frazer Irving

Tooth's latest foray into the horror genre is a big disappointment, saved only by some powerful full colour art by the Necronauts' Frazer Irving. It's a real pity, as this is a story with a fascinating premise (simply put, it's Romeo and Juliet with lycanthropes and vampires cast as the Montagues and Capulets), a terrific central villain (Karkossa, the vampire king) and a first episode crammed with good ideas and dripping with potential (not to mention blood). Unfortunately, story quality heads south pretty quickly after such a sterling start, deteriorating into one long chase/fight scene, the depraved and dangerous Karkossa used far too sparingly, and the whole thing wrapped up in just under 40 pages. What a waste. Tooth has seemed keen to explore more adult themes recently (there's some hot vampire-on-werewolf sex action in this story, for instance), but that needs to be backed up by a belief that the comic's audience can cope with a slower pace and with stories that unfold over several months rather than just six or seven weeks. Like I said, the best thing about *A Love Like Blood* is Frazer Irving's art: beautifully coloured, atmospheric and a hint of menace in every panel. I may be damning him with faint praise, but this man was born to draw horror comics.

The Verdict: A great idea executed badly, but some quality artwork makes it worth a look. (AW)

Ultimate X-Men #7
Marvel
By Mark Millar and Adam Kubert

A more apt title for this comic would be X-Men Lite. Inclusion in Marvel's Ultimate line, apparently, involves taking characters, stripping them of their unique histories and mannerisms, and pumping them full of 'coolness' – whatever that nebulous word means these days.

In Nightcrawler's case, it also seems to involve stripping him of his dignity. "Dear God," murmurs Dr Cornelius, "is that really the same little German boy who was still wetting his bunk a few months ago?" Thanks a lot, Marvel.

In itself, the plot is very good – the gist being that Weapon X is a programme to capture mutants and turn them into living weapons, run by an organization very familiar to long-term readers – and the creative team does a first-class job with it.

But the lead characters are not the X-Men. They're a bunch of different creatures who have been stamped with an X, presumably because X-titles sell.

The Verdict: Well-executed, but a perversion of the premise – and confusing for new readers when racked next to the other X-titles. (MS)

Wonder Woman #171
DC
By Phil Jimenez and Travis Moore

This prelude to DC's big summer crossover (**Our Worlds At War**) starts slowly but builds up to a visually thrilling two-onto-one as WW takes on her old friend Vanessa Kapatelis, who's the new Silver Swan, and the Cheetah.

There's a lot of dialogue to wade through before the brawl gets going, with most of the work going into character development – which indicates that Jimenez is working his way through the legacy left by previous writers, in order to get it to make sense. The unfortunate side effect of this is that it weighs the story down somewhat.

It's a small price to pay, though; this is clearly a labour of love for writer/penciller Jimenez, and the news that he has been signed to produce another year's worth of Wonder Woman should be greeted with delight by devotees of the series.

The Verdict: Wordy but worth the work. (MS)

Xeno's Arrow: Book II #3
Radio Comix
By Stephen Geigen-Miller & Greg Beetam

Xeno and the rest of the former alien zoo inmates meet ALFALFA, the underground movement that sent Captain Kobb to their aid... except they didn't. They turn out to be a bunch of high school kids incapable of organizing anything, but chaos ensues when the authorities come down on them while following Kobb's trail.

This is a good title with an interesting premise (escaped sentients from an alien zoo search for a safe haven), and intriguing characters. However, while the art is usually of a very high standard, it is distinctly rougher here, appearing particularly lazy on some of the later pages of this issue.

The Verdict: An increasingly interesting and enjoyable series let down by below-par artwork. (NL)

X-Treme X-Men #3
Marvel
By Chris Claremont and Salvador Larroca

The action pauses for a character-based issue, as the X-Men try to deal with the fallout from their battle with the mysterious Vargas in the previous issue.

Writer Claremont is working hard to make us sympathize with the team members. As a result the word count is high, this issue taking a while to get through. He does fit in some interesting developments though, including the beginnings of an explanation of how the Beast changes into the feline form he's currently sporting in the pages of New X-Men – and why he manages to appear in both titles.

This story leaves the X-Men bloodied, battered, and two members down. Where do they go from here?

The Verdict: The comfort blanket for fans of old-style X-tales delivers a decent soap opera punch in contrast to the usual fisticuffs. (MS)

Zoom's Academy for the Super Gifted #1
Astonish Comics
By Jason Lethcoe

This is the finest comic I have read this year. If you love Roald Dahl, if you love Harry Potter, if you used to watch BBC children's dramas on long winter evenings and secretly wish you could have adventures of your own, then you too will fall in love with this book. The first issue is devoted to setting up the story. As we follow the daily trials of young Summer Henderson, the most expertly portrayed teenager in comics, there is an almost palpable anticipation. Just what is her father's job? What sort of summer school is reached by sailing through the night? The answer, of course, is in the title. And even reading this issue in a summer heatwave, I can feel those winter nights drawing in.

The Verdict: Harry Potter with Spandex. This is gonna be HUGE! (AG)

ZINE SEEN

ALLY AND THE BIG MAN

Send an A5 SAE to Chris Askham, 9 Balmoral Grove, Colwick, Nottingham NG4 2GB for a free copy.

Chris Askham has produced some fine work in the past, notably in collaboration with Dan Powell on SIN. Here he steps out on his own to preview what looks like a charmingly surreal series, in which everyday people and large, friendly monsters appear to co-exist as a matter of course. The characters are clearly presented, and the art mixes realism with extreme caricature, while telling a fairly complex anecdote very clearly. Askham seems to have a well-conceived and promising concept on hand here, and I look forward to seeing more of it.

The Verdict: A stylish and captivating preview. (MK)

A WORD IN YOUR EYE

Enquiries to Steve Sneyd, Hilltop Press, 4 Nowell Place, Almondbury, Huddersfield, West Yorks. HD5 8PB.

Sneyd's scholarly monograph about the interaction between words and pictures deals specifically with the idea of the graphic poem, but many of his observations are also applicable to comics.

Indeed, his examples of graphic poems *are* comics, be they generated by poets such as Dave Ward, or by small press comics creators, or by historical innovators such as Wilhelm Busch. Consequently this booklet offers a view of comics from outside the usual scope of fandom, and is all the more interesting and worth reading for it.

The Verdict: A fascinating essay on the nature of comics. (MK)

BULLDOG ADVENTURE MAGAZINE #1

£2 from Jason Cobley, 94 Elm Road, Wisbech, Cambridgeshire PE13 2TB.

This issue marks the welcome return of one of the British small-press' most famous characters, Captain Winston Bulldog. On an alternate Earth where talking, humanoid animals and plants have evolved alongside humans, Bulldog fights to keep Blighty free from the rule of the human-hating Vegenation in two new stories, backed up with strips about a paranormal investigator and a diminutive World War I fighter pilot.

The tone throughout is light-hearted, and the whole comic has the feel of a classic boys' adventure title, but with enough of a contemporary edge to prevent it becoming twee. There's a variety of artistic styles, but they work well together, with Paul Harrison's loose, manic line work being a particular highlight.

The Verdict: Good scripts and great art make this the mutt's nuts. (CS)

FANTASTIC FUN DAY

£4 from Jennifer Cole, 8 Evenwood Close, Carlton Drive, Putney, London SW15 2DA.

Those who recall the very active British fanzine scene of the 1980s, and younger readers who want a taste of how that scene used to be, will undoubtedly enjoy this very smart booklet produced in association with a fan gathering last May. It celebrates the Marvel work of the gathering's guest, Steve Englehart, collecting reviews and overviews of his career's highlights and mixing in fan art contributions by the likes of Ian Churchill, D'Israeli, and John McCrea, alongside previews of pencils from a forthcoming Avengers mini-series by Englehart and Jorge Santamaria.

The Verdict: Stylish, nostalgic fun. (MK)

THE GECKO #2

£1.50 from Paradox Comics, 30 Hill Street, Poole, Dorset BN15 1NR.

Or Spider-Man by another name. Young Danny Carter has been kidnapped by a mad scientist, and had the DNA of a gecko grafted to his own genetic make-up, giving him enhanced senses, augmented strength and a prehensile tail. It also seems to have given him a knack for smart-mouth dialogue – this is sub-Spider-Man superhero backchat all the way, accompanied by a melodramatic and largely unnecessary running commentary. Still, the art is good in a Humberto Ramos style, with plenty of cartoony action.

The Verdict: With a tighter rein on the dialogue and fewer superfluous captions this title could blossom. (CS)

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE #2

£1.50 from Simon Perrins, 11 Royal Park Avenue, Leeds LS6 1EZ.

Mistimed Millennium fever, pop culture icons, witchcraft and mechanised conspiracy theories are just some of the elements thrown into Simon Perrin's highly enjoyable **Hope for the Future** #2.

Three friends attend a computer expo in London, where they uncover a plot to take over the country by an unlikely enemy; thankfully help comes from an even more unlikely heroine. Packed with ideas and bursting with energy and humour, **Hope for the Future** is constantly entertaining, with witty dialogue and a good cliffhanger ending. Perrins' art is strong and confident, with bold line work and a skill for facial expressions.

The Verdict: Fun from beginning to end, this title is bizarre, energetic and, above all, hugely enjoyable. (CS)

THE O MEN #11.

£1.50 or £6 for six issues from Martin Eden, 35 Woodbury Street, Tooting, London. SW17 9RP

THERE are elements of soap opera in Martin Eden's **The O Men**, together with super-heroes both traditional and offbeat – but all are woven together with genuine emotion – and the characters soon grow beyond their stereotypes.

Eden's writing is both intelligent and surprising, with plots rarely leading where you expect (this issue is a fine example), and characters that are always human first, super second. Eden is also a superior artist with a highly-developed design sense, well aware of how to use black and white - and empty space - to full effect.

The Verdict: A literate and affecting super-hero book. (RH)

SPACE OPERA - THE ARTIST'S BOOK

Enquiries to MJ Weller, 3 Queen Adelaide Court, Queen Adelaide Rd, Penge, London SE20 7DZ.

Between early 1997 and the last month of 1999 Michael Weller steadily self-published the first continuing series he'd attempted in his 30 years of producing comics. In the course of its 12 issues he managed to sum up virtually every major preoccupation engaged in the English and American comics industries during the 20th century, to invest them with his own unique style and voice, to invent a couple of new narrative techniques and, in effect, to write 'finis' to the old and open a door to the new. Of course, hardly anyone noticed.

Self-publication may be the only viable option for those few souls with the will and the vision to cast off all preconceptions about the nature of comics and experiment freely with the medium, but the price of it is extremely limited distribution and publicity, and thus comparative obscurity. If comics in the English language were regarded as a legitimate art form then this challenging, often disturbing and densely layered compendium of pop, pulp and autobiography would, I'm sure, be regarded as an epochal masterpiece. In fact, that's exactly how I do regard it. You want a plot synopsis? Well, there's this team of superheroes which spans the generations and engages in the ultimate conflict between Heaven and Hell against the backdrop of a faked history of 20th century pop culture... look, forget it. The plot is skeletal: the flesh is in the extraordinary free-wheeling imagination and force with which Weller has realised his incredibly ambitious concept.

If you want to experience something genuinely new and different in comics, if you want to find out what the medium is really capable of producing, contact Weller and arrange to get your hands on **Space Opera**.

The Verdict: Perhaps the most significant English language comic yet to have appeared. (MK)

TWO TO BEAM UP #2

£2 from Tim Brown, 22 Woodborough Drive, Winscombe, Somerset BS25 1HB or Ralph Kidson, 3 Langridges Close,

Newick, East Sussex BN8 4LZ.
Two of the best deadpan humorists working in the British small press get together and have a good old bash at a couple of popular targets. Tim Brown takes on the original *Star Wars* film, while his partner in crime, Ralph Kidson, has a go at 2000 AD's editorial alien, The Mighty Tharg. The result is extremely childish and funny, but it doesn't really represent either creator at his peak, perhaps because these targets have been hit many times before. Check out Brown's Nightclub Nick and Kidson's Sad Animal before investing in this.
The Verdict: A good laugh, but these guys can be much funnier. (MK)

TOENAIL CLIPPINGS #2
IR£2.95 from Steven Weekes and Brendan Byrne, Big If Publications, Granby House, 23 Lower Dominick Street, Dublin 1, Ireland.
If there's anything wrong with this smartly produced collection it might be a tendency to try and fit in as many angles as possible. Byrne's moody, scanned and blurred vignettes of outsider loneliness and discomfort sit a little incongruously alongside adventure strip spoofs in the **Viz** style, and Gabriel Reyes's vicious spoof of clubland manners. In other words, the parts don't gel. But that isn't uncommon for anthologies, and when most of the parts are as strong, and the whole is as well packaged as in this case, that's grounds enough to recommend reading it – in short bursts.
The Verdict: A strong anthology in search of an overall identity. (MK)

THE COLLECTED VERDICT
TRADE PAPERBACK REVIEWS

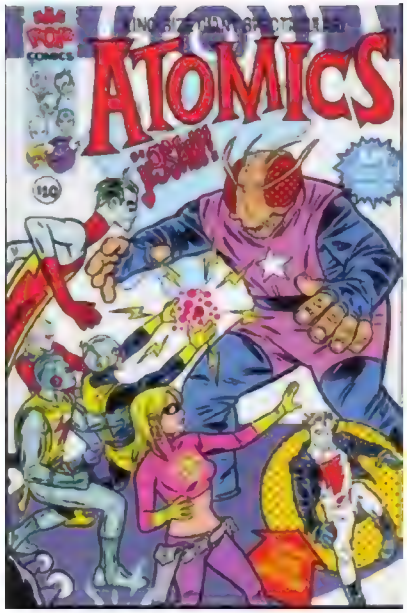
Astronauts in Trouble: Live From the Moon
AiT/plaNETlar
By Larry Young, Matt Smith and Charlie Adlard

I feel cheap for just repeating what Warren Ellis says in his introduction to **Live from the Moon**, but what he says is right: AiT is an action movie with a brain. There're explosions, thrills and spills, and Larry Young even finds space to fit in a plot, something the majority of action movies tend to skim over with the lightest of explanations.

Billionaire Ishmael Hayes is going to the moon and he's taking the courageous Channel 7 news team along with him to record the event for posterity. When a terrorist attack pushes the launch date forward, Hayes and the news team blast off prematurely to return humanity to the moon for the 50th anniversary of the first moon landing. Smith's art on the first three parts of the story is disappointing, especially when compared to Adlard's work on the last two parts.

Smith seems to leave a lot of people in his artwork as pure white outlines which, rather than being a clever stylistic flourish, just looks as if he couldn't be bothered to finish things off.
The Verdict: A blockbusting story that's only real fault is Matt Smith's lacklustre artwork. (JP)

The Atomics: Worlds Within Worlds



AAA Pop Comics
By Mike Allred

If you've been enjoying Allred's work over at **X-Force** then **The Atomics**, which he writes as well as draws, should provide thrills and laughs aplenty with its equally askew take on the superhero team genre. Reprinting issues nine through 12 of the regular series, this 'King-Size Giant Spectacular' is a perfect introduction to the beatnik mutants for whom absurd adventures and bizarre plot twists are only ever a heartbeat away.

Clearly influenced by 50s sci-fi and 60s superheroes, **The Atomics** is retro with a capital R. But although Allred revels in the simplicity and strangeness of pop culture's past, he isn't afraid to grab it by the lapels and laugh long and hard into its face either. The result is almost too entertaining – like *Plan Nine From Outer Space* directed by Andy Warhol, or what would have happened if Lee and Kirby had created the *X-Men* while off their faces on industrial strength acid.

The book's inherent insanity is reinforced by a powerful strand of humour that is unapologetically silly, not to mention supremely camp. Characters have names like Mr Gum, Lava Lass and Zap Man, while Allred indulges his passion for visual gags with a gross-out kissing scene involving a gelatinous blob of female sexuality known as The Slug. Of course, there's enormous irony at play here, but the Canadian creator's occasional sly wink to camera doesn't detract from the book's essential charm. Indeed, there's a refreshing innocence about **The Atomics** sadly lacking in other superhero team books, many of which have taken post-**Watchmen** 'realism' to unpleasant, humour-free extremes.

However enjoyable the stories, one must never lose sight of the **Madman** creator's main strength: his wonderful visuals. Buoyed by a truly in-your-face colouring job from wife Laura, Allred's work fizzes and crackles off the page, a Pop Art riot of dazzling panels and jaw-dropping splashes. There's no doubt that the influence of Ditko and Kirby (especially) looms large here, but Allred pulls it all off with such panache and vibrancy that his obvious debt to comics' past masters should be regarded as a strength rather than a weakness.
The Verdict: Hilarious, clever and beautifully drawn, this is a must for fans of the new, improved X-Force. (AW)

Benkei in New York
Pulp
By Jinpachi Mori and Jiro Taniguchi

Benkei is an artist of outstanding ability. He can produce a perfect copy of an old master from memory. It's all the more unusual then that he also works as a hitman, arranging dark justice for those who have escaped the law. I guarantee that reading the first story in this collection – *Haggis* – will send shivers down your spine.

There are a good variety of stories in this volume, some sexual in content, and the desire to read it all in one long sitting is extremely tempting. The art is superbly crafted, with an excellent judgement of pace, creating real tension when needed, or pausing on a single detail.

Indeed, artist Jiro Taniguchi is impressively versatile, whether rendering tenements, dinosaur skeletons or snowscapes. He has a particular knack for capturing the city at night.

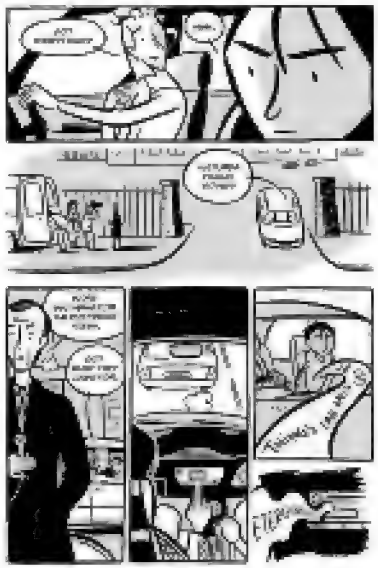
If I had to find one complaint, it would be that some of the facial expressions seem a bit static. Room for improvement then, but not much.
The Verdict: Dark slices of urban horror that will chill you and thrill you. (AG)

Breakfast After Noon
Oni Press
By Andi Watson

Deservedly nominated for an Eisner award when it was released as a limited series last year, if anything **Breakfast** works even better as a complete, single volume.

The simple story concerns an English couple learning to cope with redundancy after losing their jobs in a pottery factory barely weeks before their planned wedding day.

The straightforward plot gives Watson plenty of room to really explore his central characters – Rob and Louise – and take a surgical scalpel to their life together. There's a beautifully



observed frisson between this couple which says much about the essential love/hate nature of so many relationships, summed up perfectly by the wildly different ways in which the two react to their sudden joblessness.

Bullish at first ("I'm going to get our jobs back"), Rob quickly descends into impotent rage, before wallowing in sorry acceptance of the poor hand life has just dealt him. It's a mortification process of sorts, which ultimately leaves Rob listless, disconnected and unpleasant, as if having no job has knocked his moral compass out of whack. Louise, on the other hand, remains almost irritatingly chirpy, enrolling in college computer classes and enthusiastically committing herself to all kinds of retraining. With the foundations of their relationship – trust and reciprocity – suddenly undermined, the two begin to drift apart, and it's here that Watson's increasing mastery of the medium comes into its own.

For a start, his dialogue is astoundingly true to life. In Watson's place lesser writers would have opted for melodramatic soliloquies or whip smart one-liners to emphasise the couple's growing disdain for each other. Such an approach perhaps would have made **Breakfast** a more poetic or humorous work, but Watson knows that real people in real situations don't spend their time struggling with clever metaphors or engaging in *Frasier*-esque banter. Instead he gives us many well-crafted exchanges full of the kind of bitter trivialities and pent up resentments that unhappy lovers throw at each other all the time.

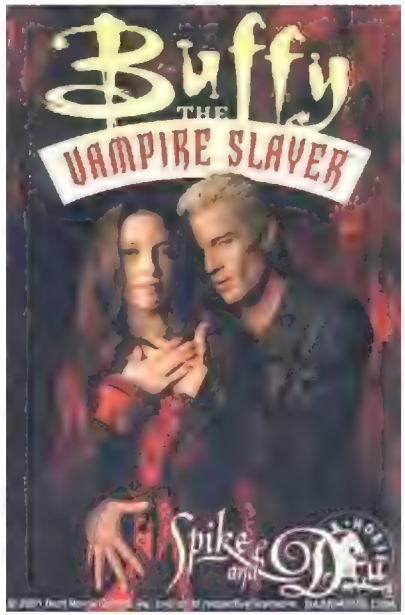
Watson plays a nice little trick with his characters, too. Although it's Louise who should engage our total sympathy, her refusal to be ground down or spat out by life making her, on the surface, an attractive, ballsy figure, it's actually Rob with whom the reader connects most strongly. Even at his worst, when he's lashing out at everything and everyone he loves, Rob never loses our complete and unwavering support. We want him to get his job back, win Louise over and make it all okay again. The fact that Watson makes us care for such a seemingly mawkish twit is testament to his talent.

Although there're some sumptuously rendered backgrounds and buildings here, the **Skeleton Key** and **Geisha** creator cleverly opts to keep his figure work as uncomplicated as possible. Oddly, rather than detracting from the setting and subject matter of the story, this approach enhances it, Watson's facility for facial expression and body language enabling him to transcend the cartoonish feel of his characters' thick black lines and 'dots for eyes' features.

Breakfast might flirt with perfection but there are, inevitably, a couple of minor nits to be picked. Watson's desire to provide a happy, uplifting ending doesn't really gel with the slice-of-life realism that informs the rest of the book, and the broken plate motif that runs parallel to the main 'fractured relationship' storyline comes off as a little lacking in the subtlety department. But those are trivial matters and shouldn't detract in any way from the fact that **Breakfast** is a terrific, somewhat unique work with lots of compelling things to say about modern relationships.

The Verdict: A beautifully packaged collection of a truly major work. (AW)

Buffy The Vampire Slayer: Spike & Dru
Titan /Dark Horse
By Christopher Golden, James Marsters & Ryan Sook



You may have heard that the Spike and Dru strips were some of the better comic book entries into the Buffy-verse; after all, how can they go wrong with the best character in the show (and I don't mean Drusilla)? Well, how about starting with plots so thin they could catwalk (Spike & Dru drink, stumble across bad ass demon, kill it, er, next!), neglecting to add humour (how is it possible to write Spike without humour?), then giving your otherwise strong penciller (Ryan Sook) both wishy-washy inking and limited palette colouring!

One story featured here does benefit from the input of James Marsters, aka Spike, bringing at least a little of his character's voice to the writing, but otherwise this is another wasted opportunity. Still, at least you can't hear Drusilla's voice.

The Verdict: Disappointing, and it's all Joss Whedon's fault. Blame him for raising the bar so high! (RH)

Dark Blue
Avatar Press
By Warren Ellis & Jacen Burrows

Originally serialised in Avatar's anthology title, Threshold, **Dark Blue** is a violent and twisted story of cops, murder and lethal hallucinogenic drugs.

An improvement on Ellis's previous Avatar work, **Dark Blue** is an intense portrayal of Frank Christchurch, a cop with an obsession, namely to trace the man who he believes is responsible for a series of murders in the city. Except Frank can never find any evidence apart from a name, Trent Wayman, and will do anything to track him down. Being a Warren Ellis story things are never as simple as they may seem, and Frank, Wayman and the city all have hidden secrets.

I'd never come across Jacen Burrows's work prior to this book but he's certainly a name to look out for in the future. He portrays the brutal madness of Frank's world to great effect and it's his work, combined with the strong story from Ellis, which makes this book so effective.

The Verdict: A powerful mature-readers story with excellent art. Recommended. (JP)

Goldfish
Image
By Brian Michael Bendis

Goldfish is a card-shark conman, determined to rescue his son from the clutches of a megalomaniac crime boss who just happens to be the boy's

mother. All the usual Bendis trademarks are present – most notably the rambling dialogue spiked with hilarious quips – but the obvious comic noir comparisons (**Sin City**/**100 Bullets**) dissolve as you read on.

Lacking the hardcore hipness of Miller or Azzarello creations, **Goldfish** and his supporting cast are more recognisably human – yet still cursed by vanity, cowardice and indecision. Closest in tone then to David Lapham's **Stray Bullets**, a comparison that stretches to Bendis's indie-cinema art style and layouts. The story builds to a killer climax, too – proving this writer can plot as well as he scripts!

The Verdict: Like Powers, without the capes, this is pure, undiluted Bendis – makes you wish he'd never discovered superheroes! (RH)

Joker/Mask
Dark Horse
By Henry Gilroy & Ramon F. Bachs

COLLECTING the four-part mini in which the Joker is possessed by the Mask and becomes… even more insane? See, there's the problem already! You can't get any more insane than the Joker, so all the Mask does is give pasty-face Mxyzptlk-style chaos powers and ups the ante for his mischief.

Fortunately, this is **Batman Adventures** Gotham, so rather than using his abilities to whittle down the Bat-supporting cast even further, Mr. J simply becomes the host of his own ratings-grabbing TV show before the not-so-Dark Knight shows up to save the day.

It's a light, broad-humoured story (don't expect incisive media satire) with suitably cartoon artwork. You'll have forgotten it 10 minutes after putting it down, but it's fun while you're reading.

The Verdict: About 90 per cent Joker and 10 per cent Mask, this is a moderately amusing team-up with few surprises. (RH)

Planetary – All Over the World & Other Stories/The Fourth Man
Wildstorm
By Warren Ellis & John Cassady.

He's a contrary bugger, that Warren Ellis. Listen to him talk and you'd believe he hated all super-heroes with a passion. Then he goes and writes this – a love letter to 20th Century pop culture: from Godzilla movies to Japanese ghost stories, from the *X Files* to *Randall & Hopkirk* (at least in Elijah Snow's dress sense), from the **Fantastic Four** to John Constantine.

For all the other references in **Planetary**, it's the superheroes that are central – though this is anything but a superhero book. Instead, it's the dark side of the legends we grew up with, a world where great power leads to greater corruption, where we all might have been a lot better off had four astronauts not taken to space in an untested rocket ship back in 1961. It's been said that immature artists imitate, while mature artists steal. Well, Warren Ellis certainly shows maturity here with a grand larceny of ideas, each given a savage and original twist by possibly the darkest imagination currently at work in mainstream comics. What's more, **Planetary** looks as good as it reads – thanks to the pristine work of John Cassady, another artist demon-strating the greatest maturity in pillaging everyone from Jim Steranko (in the wonderful Nick Fury parody) to the Warchowski Brothers (in a story that's tellingly dedicated to Grant Morrison), without once letting his own style slip. Now available in two deliciously extravagant and expensive hardcovers (containing the first 12 issues), or a more affordable paperback (the first six – volume two follows soon), this is what we've all been waiting for.

The Verdict: A mature superhero book that finally knocks Watchmen off its lofty pedestal... (RH)

Rising Stars: Born in Fire
Top Cow
By Michael J. Straczynski, Keu Cha and Christian Zanier

The future for superhero comics lies in a reassessment of priorities. Where once the fight scene was king, today's audience demands strong characters and smart plot concepts over mindless action – which explains the success of J. Michael Straczynski. The heroes of **Rising Stars** follow traditional archetypes – the patriot, the superman, the brooding loner – but each is given a real world twist, and motivations that go beyond simply 'fighting for justice'.

Of the eight issues collected here, the first half is stronger, a series of character studies that establish the back-story and direction, whilst sparing time to flesh out individuals as real human beings, not just super-powered cyphers. It's almost a shame then when the inevitable action kicks in and character suddenly becomes secondary to plot.

The only other disappointment is the substandard art, unless you're fond of McFarlane copyists (Keu Cha) or weak imitations of the early '90s Image house-style (Christian Zanier). Fortunately the writing's good enough to carry the book – though it'll be interesting to see whether the character-building takes even more of a backseat in book two. Hopefully not.

The Verdict: JMS puts character before action, giving a refreshing twist on the superhero genre – shame about the art. (RH)

Star Trek: Other Realities
Wildstorm
By various writers and artists

THIS collection contains three stories culled from different parts of the **Trek** mythos, and very entertaining they are too.

All Of Me sees Kirk, Spock and the rest of the Enterprise crew taking on a megalomaniac scientist who's been capturing genetic duplicates of himself from a host of alternate dimensions. His aim? To build a veritable army of uber-boffins with which he can conquer the universe, of course!

Tony Isabella and Bob Ingersoll's inventive story zips along at breakneck speed, dragging an impressive array of twists and turns in its wake. In fact, this could very easily have been a direct adaptation of an old Trek episode, so faithful is it to the slightly bonkers spirit of the original TV show.

The most impressive thing about the Deep Space Nine story, *N-Vector*, is Toby Cypress's art: angular, awkward and dark, it brings a refreshingly unkempt air to a **Trek** universe that's often too antiseptic for its own good. Enhanced by some moody colours, Cypress's work lends proceedings an edge of paranoia that is perfectly in keeping with the 'smart virus loose aboard the station' storyline.

Best of the bunch, though, is Peter David's *Double Time*, which features the crew from his line of *New Frontier* novels. David clearly understands **Trek** inside and out, enabling him to effectively utilise many of the franchise's most enduring elements to create something that feels both familiar and new, all at the same time. As a result his story is a notch or two above **Trek** heaven, starting off with a good old fashioned moral dilemma, inexorably leading to time travel, confrontations with seriously tooled-up aliens and plot swerves aplenty.

Mike Collins's graceful, expressive art makes this an almost perfect comics debut for the *New Frontier* crew.

The Verdict: An enormously enjoyable collection, whether you're a Trek fan or not. (AW)

Transmetropolitan: Lonely City
Vertigo
Warren Ellis and Darick Robertson

IN this, the fifth album of collected Transmet issues, we find our hero Spider Jerusalem at a bit of a loose end early on before eventually finding himself a cause for which to fight. The earlier stories go for a walk up Self-Indulgence Street, veer off up Ho-Hum-It's-Yet-More-Filth-And-Swear-Words Avenue, before turning up Hey-There's- Really-A-Plot-Here-Somewhere Road. Up the avenue, one has a sense of Ellis Vu – been there, bought the tee shirt, was shocked when I still had hair and giggled a lot after three lagers.

Things improve enormously in the collection's second half,

wherein Spider finds that his latest toy, a genetic structure reader, has a more sinister side. In a story with close parallels to the Stephen Lawrence murder case, Ellis throws in action, intrigue, terse dialogue, and the odd genuinely funny witticism, rekindling our love for the journalist of the future and his unorthodox ways.

Darick Robertson's visuals are solid and dependable as ever, if hardly the stuff of fanboy fantasy, while Patrick (Captain Picard) Stewart provides a nice introduction in which he reveals that Spider Jerusalem is his hero. ***The Verdict: Ellis's guitar might only play three chords, but at least they're damn good ones - just like Travis. (DM)***

Ultimate Spider-Man: Power and Responsibility
Marvel
By Bill Jemas, Brian Michael Bendis and Mark Bagley

Peter Parker is a geeky kid living with his aunt and uncle after his parents died in a plane crash. Mocked at school, he has few friends, and is always the target for school bullies. Then, one day, Peter is bitten by a spider, gains incredible powers and begins to learn that with great power comes great responsibility. We've known this since Lee and Ditko committed the first Spider-Man story to paper in **Amazing Fantasy** #15. So why, 39 years on, should it be retold? Arguably it's because the original Spider-Man myth is looking dated, so perhaps it's time to bring Spider-Man and the rest of the Marvel Universe into the new Millennium, and to a whole new generation of readers, by recreating the myth from the ground up.

Do Jemas, Bendis and Bagley achieve their goal? To an extent they do, but there are flaws. In this first collection of issues one to seven we're introduced to Peter and his world, see him discovering his powers and eventually battling Norman Osborn, newly transformed into the Green Goblin. The writing's of a high standard, Bendis more than living up to his rep as a master of dialogue, while Bagley's pencils are fitting for this pop culture recreation of the character, and for our first look at this new Marvel Universe. But, it isn't different enough. For a project that was expected to reinvent Spider-Man, it's drearily familiar and takes all 184 pages to tell us pretty much what we already know.

And that is **Ultimate Spider-Man**'s real problem: instead of being a recreation of Spider-Man in the new Marvel Universe, all too frequently it merely retells stories and situations we've seen many times before.
The Verdict: A competent, well-told origin story, which wouldn't have been out of place in the regular Marvel Universe. Unfortunately, this is the Ultimate Marvel Universe, and it was touted as being something different. (JP)

Whiteout
Oni Press
By Greg Rucka and Steve Lieber

Antartica, bottom of the world, defined by plains of ice and cold. In this most inhospitable of environments US Marshal Carrie Stetko finds a body – someone has been murdered on the Ice, and it's her job to find the killer. If only it was as simple as it sounded. With a mysterious British intelligence agent, missing scientific teams, and the discovery of more dead bodies, Carrie's problems are only just beginning. Rucka weaves a complex tale of murder and greed in this gripping crime story, which you will not be able to put down. Realistically illustrated by Steve Lieber, it's refreshing to read something down to earth in this industry dominated by superheroics and the fantastic.
The Verdict: An addictive murder mystery recommended to anyone with even the slightest interest in crime dramas. (JP)

WILDCATS: Vicious Circles
Wildstorm
By Joe Casey and Sean Phillips

Collecting the first six issues of Casey and Phillips's run on the title, this trade is a strange beast. While presumably a good jumping-on point, being the start of a new writer's run, the major storylines appear to be devoted to wrapping up pre-existing plots – as evidenced by the need for two pages of 'What you need to know' before the start of the first issue proper. This could put some readers off, as not all the previous issues of **Wildcats Volume II** have been collected, and those that have are only available as a pricey hardcover. That said, this is good, mature superheroics, addressing what the Wildcats should do now they've discovered that their reason for being together, the Kherubim-Daemonite war, was resolved many hundreds of years ago without their knowledge. They are heroes left to their own devices with no real goal to work for anymore. Phillips's stunning artwork is worth the price of admission alone, and as Casey's work here is probably the best of his career so far, Wildcats is well worth taking a look at.
The Verdict: A sophisticated super-hero comic, featuring some of the best artwork in comics today. (JP)

THE CLASSIC TPBK REVIEW

Bone Volume I: Out From Boneville
Cartoon Books; By Jeff Smith

IN July 1991, the first 3000 copies of **Bone** shipped to comic stores. Now, ten years on, **Bone** #44 is about to ship and Volume VII of the collected editions will soon be in stores. Jeff Smith must have done something right. Right?

Yes, he did. The first volume of **Bone** is witty, quick thinking and most of all pure fun to read. We are introduced to the three Bone cousins – Fone Bone, Phoney Bone and Smiley Bone. Stuck in the desert outside their hometown of Boneville, having been run out of town after one of Phoney's greedy schemes has gone wrong, the Bone cousins attempt to find shelter. Fone Bone is soon separated from his cousins and discovers a wonderful valley, but what are those stupid stupid rat creatures doing, and what do they want with Phoney Bone?

Bone is a true all-ages book – the crisp artwork makes it accessible to all and the mix of action and humour is perfect. Smith captures the imagination with his story of the Bone cousins, and he takes the time to ensure his book's characters are individual and distinctly defined from the off. Unlike some books where the initial issues can struggle to find a voice, Bone speaks loud and clear from the outset and rewards the reader right from the start.

Bone is a book which should appeal to something in everyone and it'd certainly be a great bedtime book with which to introduce a youngster to the medium of comics. If I have one problem with this first collection it's that it ends midway through a storyline, meaning you have to buy subsequent volumes to find out how things turn out.
The Verdict: Laughs, thrills, spills and a quiche-eating rat creature. Everything you ever needed in a comic book. (JP)

THE NET VERDICT

ADAM HUGHES DISCUSSION GROUP
(http://groups.yahoo.com/group/hughes-fans)
Recently established at Yahoo but resurrected from a previous group run by Larry Dempster, this site is the best place on the net to find news and information about Wonder Woman cover artist Adam Hughes. The group has grown steadily since its inception and now includes a number of working comics professionals, so there's more information here than you would normally find. The group is very friendly and laid back with a minimum of off-topic deviations, and Hughes himself occasionally communicates to the group via an old high school friend who remains on the list. With all the contacts within the group, there is now also a very large collection of artwork for view, with the overspill archive located at *www.angelfire.com/art/adamhughes/*.

The only downside to a resource this size is the lack of thumbnails, but this is a minor point in comparison to its benefits. The group has also established connections to another Yahoo Hughes site – theadamhughesfanclub – but clearly remains the big brother of the two.

The Verdict: A welcoming and essential site for any self-respecting Hughes fan. (NL)

ALEX ROSS ART
(www.alexrossart.com)

While Ross polarises the comic-buying public with his nicely painted but heavily photo-referenced artwork, this site is undeniably one of the best sites dedicated to a single creator. While pages can take a while to load, the reward is great for the Ross fan, with clearly laid out areas devoted to Ross's individual projects, as well as other pages featuring works in progress, lesser seen merchandise work, news and a healthy stash of art up for sale (at loan-incurring costs, though!). Almost every aspect of Ross's work and career is covered, but sadly the man responsible for the site's maintenance, Bob Riley, passed away recently, and Ross's lack of a computer system threatens to halt any further progress.

The Verdict: As comprehensive a guide to a sole creator as you're likely to find. (NL)

ASTONISH COMICS
(www.theastonishfactory.com)

This is the official site for the publishers of Herobear and the Kid, and Zoom's Academy for the Super Gifted. It's a well thought out, quick loading, easy to navigate site. There are synopses for all published issues, including details of all printings and variant covers, teasers for upcoming issues, a nice range of merchandise with ordering info, interviews with the creators, a gallery of art – including fan art, and links to sites that have given them glowing reviews. If you love the books this company produces (and if you don't, you're in a tiny minority), you can quite happily lose yourself in here for a happy half-hour or so.

The Verdict: This site, like Herobear, is small but perfectly formed. (AG)

BLACKBOAR PRESS
(www.blackboarpress.com)
David Hitchcock is the British writer/artist behind the Spirit of the Highwayman graphic novel released to no little acclaim a couple of years ago. Now he's produced this simple, effective and very rewarding site to showcase old, new and unpublished work. For a start, there's a very nice section featuring the cover and some interior art from Hitchcock's next release – the Jack-the-Ripper-inspired **Whitechapel Freak**.

The sample black and white pages are a good indication of Hitchcock's spooky, affecting style – they also give him the chance to show off his ability to render Victorian architecture in all its intricate, smog-infused glory. Some of the best stuff here, though, is contained in the gallery section, in which Hitchcock has placed several pages from an unpublished Batman *Elseworlds* story.

It's enormously impressive, as is Treasure, another unpublished piece, reproduced here in full. Just one quibble, though. The download times for the site's title page and homepage are a little lengthy for those of us with short attention spans and little patience.

The Verdict: This site provides a perfect taster for the work of one of the UK's most promising writer/artists. (AW)

THE BOONDOCKS
(www.ucomics.com/boondocks/viewbo.htm and www.boondocks.net)
One of the best newspaper strips around, and sadly little read outside the US, The Boondocks concerns itself with the experiences of a black family living in the modern-day US. Perhaps too political at times to achieve the mainstream international success of *Peanuts* or *Garfield*, it is nonetheless an excellent read. The writing is top-notch, as is the characterisation,and the art is interesting in that it is drawn in a pseudo-Manga style, which is very effective.

The main Boondocks site has a simple but attractive look and structure. It contains all the background information one might need, from biographies of the characters, and of creator Aaron McGruder, to information on how to order the collected editions. Bizarrely, the strips themselves are not available on the main site, but the ucomics site contains a complete archive as well as offering the chance to buy original artwork.

The Verdict: An excellent strip supported by two solid, if unexciting, websites. (KG)

THE HIGHER AUTHORITY
(www.thehigherauthority.com)
The first thing you notice about this **Authority**-dedicated site is the astonishingly slow loading times. On more than a few pages I got bored waiting for graphics to finish appearing, and went somewhere else instead. The large number of typos, and the missing images, don't really help matters either. That aside, the actual content is reasonably competent.

You can read the first four pages of the latest issue, ideal for fans that have dropped the book in frustration following Wildstorm's tarting about with creative teams. The other main attraction is the message board, which has a modest amount of posts, which tend to favour the short and sweet. There's a bunch of other stuff, such as character bios and fan art, but it's nothing worth writing home about.

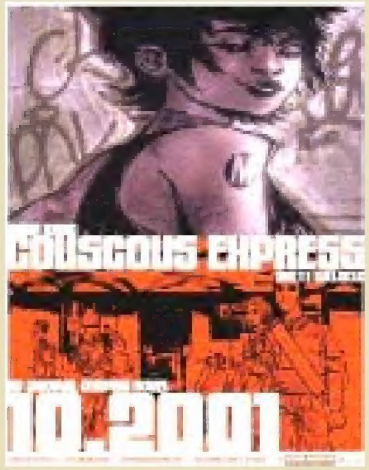
The Verdict: An ambitious site, that ultimately does little more than scratch the surface. (AG)

THINGS THAT MAKE YOU GO AH!
(http:///comicbookpros.com/ah.html)
The longest running site devoted to artist Adam Hughes, this is a clearly and simply laid out site with very few frills but plenty to offer. Aside from a mini-interview with Hughes himself, and a link to the Adam Hughes Checklist, the site is split into pages focusing on cover art, pin-ups, sketches, trading card art and posters. Of these, the main draw is the sketches section, which holds a highly impressive selection of convention pieces, now easily clearing the 50-plus mark. Thumbnails load swiftly and reproduction is generally of a high standard.

The Verdict: Very light on the text side, but a great hoard of impressive artwork. (NL)

Close Up

COUSCOUS EXPRESS
(Brian Wood / Brett Weldele)



The tale of Olive, a moped rider, and her part in the New York fast wood turf war. She is popular among her crowd and has the coolest Vespa. Unfortunately this makes her a target for a rival gang of kabob* delivery riders. (*that's kebab for British readers)

Brian Wood was responsible for the Almanack's favourite ever **X-Men** comic, **Generation X** #71 where X-folk go shopping. He also wrote and drew one of the best "slightly into the future" paranoid conspiracy comics, **Channel Zero**.

The premise of **Couscous Express** could have appeared in a '60s beat movie or a song by Fun Loving Criminals. Dynamic cool art and sharp dialogue. An excellent graphic novel of action and "the best hummus recipe in New York" (although according to Brian Wood, there is no actual recipe in the book.)

Pub: AiT/PlanetLar. Previews pg 219
88 pages, black and white (£9)

COMICS ALMANACK

ADE BROWN'S PICKS FROM DIAMOND PREVIEWS

Highlights

DARK HORSE COMICS

ANCIENT JOE (Scott Morse)
Writer/artist of the excellent **Soulwind** series and many more. This is a tale of mythical scope, perhaps along the lines of Eddie Campbell's **Bacchus**.
(24pg, black & white, 1 of 3)

HARLEQUIN VALENTINE
(Neil Gaiman / John Bolton)
Gaiman is *back*! Bolton is back (after not so long).

A romance novel based on the tale of Harlequin and Columbine. Hardcover graphic novels are generally overblown, but those two creators suggest value for around £7. (Arrives in November)
(40pg, full colour)

DC COMICS(Homage)

FOUR WOMEN
(Sam Kieth)
Another original miniseries from the creator of **The Maxx**. It should probably be sampled as a trade paperback (and the **Zero Girl** TPB is solicited alongside it). No man writes women like Sam Kieth.
And this tale of a friendship bound by secrets promises great things.

Buy it before he is seduced by the dark side and Wolverine/Hulk crossovers. Oops, too late !
(32pg, 1 of 5)

DC COMICS(ABC)

GREYSHIRT: INDIGO SUNSET
(Rick Veitch)
The first escapee from Alan Moore's ABC Universe. That is, no Alan Moore brain cells were harmed in the production of this book (probably). Veitch was the man who kept Swamp Thing burning after Moore left, and here he takes the burning torch of **The Shadow** influenced series from **Tomorrow Stories**.
(32pg, 1 of 6)

DC COMICS(Vertigo)

GODDESS
(Garth Ennis / Phil Winslade)
A quiet month for Vertigo?
This story predates **Preacher** and features people with powers and huge global conspiracies. A fun story with an underlying ecological message. (256pg)

D-DAY DODGERS
(Ennis / John Higgins)
Actually Ennis strikes again with the second of his war stories. A tale of heroes away from the main action on D-Day. (64pg)

IMAGE COMICS

AGE OF BRONZE #12
(Eric Shanower)
An excellent fictionalised account of the Trojan War. The first collection has just been published, but as the entire tale is going to take about ten years, you would do well to pick up the series. Exquisite illustration. (24pg, black & white)

ONI PRESS

TROUT
(Troy Nixey)
Odd horror is promised from the author of the as yet unfinished **Jenny Finn**. This tale seems to share themes with *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. (32pg, Black & white, 1 of 2)

Adrian Brown: just1page@aol.com

Close Up

MARVEL COMICS
PARADISE X: THE HERALDS
(Ross& Krueger/ Steve Pugh)
Some Marvel heroes of interest because Earth X plays with the established characters and has the involvement of Jim Krueger (Footsoldiers) and Steve Pugh (Generation X). (32pg, 1 of 3)

Best of Last Month

DRAWN AND QUARTERLY
ATLAS #1
(Horrocks)
This month's highlight is Dylan Horrocks' **Atlas** #1. 80 pages for 3.95 and tying in to the wonderful **Hicksville**. It looks to be a long form examination of a number of Horrocks regular themes notably, a look at comics using a town where people accept comics in the way the real world accepts television.

DC COMICS
THE ESTABLISHMENT
Wildstorm (Edgington & Adlard)
The UK corner of the Wildstorm universe. Like *The Avengers* (Steed and Mrs. Peel) meet **The Avengers** (assemble!). Adlard told *Comics Almanack* "(it's) probably the best book I've worked on, not only have I got to design a whole new set of characters but Ian's written the best stuff of his career so far – we're both firing on all cylinders! I could see myself doing this for a very long time".

EDDIE CAMPBELL COMICS
SNAKES & LADDERS
(Alan Moore & Eddie Campbell)
A historic comic like only Alan Moore can write, and with his partner in crime from the epic graphic novelisation of Jack The Ripper. As his surname suggests, always expect more.

COMICS COMPASS

Helping you find your way through August's releases.

Dark Horse: Video Noire (tpb) Art by 100 Bullets artist... **DC: Batman & Superman Generations II** (1 of 4) Byrne revisits "retro" heroes... **Black Boar: Whitechapel Freak** A Tale of Jack the Ripper... **Humanoids: Son of the Gun** Jodorowsky's gunslinger epic... **ONI: The Coffin** (tpb) Collected fine sci-fi miniseries... **ONI: Hopeless Savages** #1Punk Rock antics ? (see Oni Color Special for a preview)... **Titan: Zenith** (vol.1) Grant Morrison's early triumph.

REGION ONE

Toys – Merchandise – TV Fantasy & Film – DVDs – Gaming – Computer Games

WELCOME, one and all, to the first installment of REGION ONE. As the name implies, I'll be giving you a heaping helping of US media news and reviews, everything from new movies, TV shows, DVDs, video games, toys... if it originates in North America, it's fair game! Be warned: While I don't want this to become a hard-core rumour column, I will be dealing with spoilers and upcoming episode information from time to time. So, if you would rather not know, or if you're stuck watching Buffy on the BBC, ***STOP READING NOW.*** Really, I mean it. I don't want to hear about it if you don't.

For those who are still with me... This month, I'll be looking at the Fall TV offerings from two of the US networks: UPN and WB. There's a good mix of returning favourites (Buffy, Angel) and brand new offerings (Smallville, Enterprise), which has me hoping that the game show/reality programming glut may be a thing of the past (seriously, can someone please explain the appeal of Anne Robinson? Anyone?). Next month, look for highlights from FOX, NBC, CBS, ABC and the various pay-cable channels.

UPN

After much debate, a fierce bidding war and a lot of hard feelings on both sides, **BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER** has found a new home for its sixth season on the UPN network. While this network switch will most likely have no effect on UK viewers, many in the US will be left Buffy-less next season since several key US TV markets do not have a UPN affiliate. So what impact will this have on the show itself? Very little... it's still being made by the same production

company, and with the near doubling of the per-episode price, one can only hope to see even bigger and better effects from years past.

That aside, expect more of the same from Joss Whedon and company as Xander, Anya, Dawn, Willow, Tara and Spike try to deal with life in Sunnydale after the earth-shattering season 5 finale. The rumour mill is already in high gear, and so far it looks like we can expect wedding bells, the reappearance of a familiar "vengeance demon," a slayer trysting with a certain undead blonde bloke, the return of perpetual milquetoast Jonathan and one of the "core four" characters becoming this season's "big bad." Whew! For more spoilers and rumours covering the first part of next season, check out the coaxial column on "Ain't it Cool News" (http://www.aintitcool.com). The show will air in its old WB timeslot, Tuesday nights at 8/7c. Look for the 2 hour UPN season premier in October.

ROSWELL

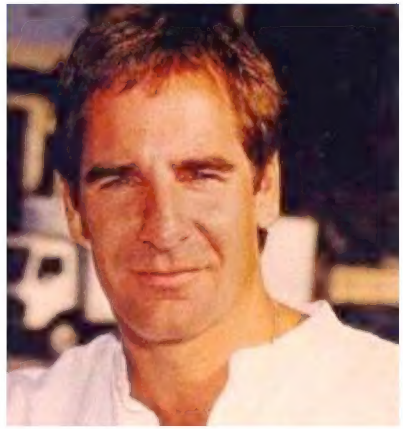
While UPN snagging **BUFFY** was the big news, they also managed to pick up the canceled teen-alien drama **ROSWELL** from the WB. Expect all new episodes this fall, with most (if not all) of the cast intact. **ROSWELL** will air Tuesday nights at 8/7c.

STAR TREK

Another hotly anticipated sci-fi series debuting this fall is the newest offering in the Star Trek universe, **ENTERPRISE**. Set in the 22nd century, a time between the movie "First Contact" and the events of the original 60's series, **ENTERPRISE** follows the adventures of the very first starship Enterprise as it begins its exploration of the galaxy.

The crew will be a mix of humans (Captain Jonathan Archer, played by Quantum Leap's Scott Bakula, Chief Engineer 'Spike' Tucker, Helmsman Travis Mayweather, Armoury Officer Malcolm Reed, Comm Officer Hoshi Sato), and aliens (the Vulcan Sub Commander T'Pol, and the enigmatic and unidentifiable alien physiology expert, Dr. Pholx), with the traditional multi-ethnic mix. The look and feel of the show will be closer to NASA than Next Gen, and most of the familiar alien races, aside from the Vulcans, aren't in the picture (key word is most!). Look for the 2-hour premier to air Wednesday, September 26th at 8/7c.

SPECIAL UNIT 2, a mid-season replacement in the 2000-2001 season, makes its full season return for 2001-2002. Following the adventures of a special supernatural crime fighting unit, SU2 is a kitchen sink combination of such films as Ghostbusters and Men In Black with a slight dash of The X-Files thrown in for good measure. Airs



Wednesdays 9/8c.

WB

While UPN may have snagged the Buff-ster, the WB is still airing new episodes of spin-off series **ANGEL**. While rumours that James "Spike" Marsters would be joining this cast this season have proven false, the regular cast of Angel, Wesley, Cordelia and Gunn will nevertheless see some expansion as the slightly barmy Fred (as seen in the season 2 finale) becomes a series regular. In addition, according to AICN, a new recurring character by the name of Holtz will be a thorn in Angel's side next season. Just who is he? A time-displaced 18th century vampire hunter out to even the score with the man who killed his family (i.e. Angelus). Look forward to more visions, more schemes from Wolfram & Hart, more demon karaoke... and well, just more in season 3. ANGEL moves to a new night this fall, Mondays at 9/8c.

Perhaps the most anticipated new show for comic fans this fall is the WB's **SMALLVILLE**, chronicling the adventures of a teenage Clark Kent (played by Tom Willing) who tries to come to terms with his mysterious past and his newfound super-abilities. Directed by X-Files veteran David Nutter, the pilot episode (and the series as a whole) is supposedly infused with a darker, creepier atmosphere than any previous Superman series.

The basic idea of "the last son of Krypton" falling to earth and being adopted by a Kansas farm family remains intact, but an additional twist has a Kryptonite meteor shower arriving at the same time, making Smallville into a sort of "hellmouth" of weirdness (indeed, the focus of the show will be on Clark, Lana Lang, and Pete Ross investigating and solving these strange events that plague the town).

Other regular characters include both Ma and Pa Kent, and a twenty-something Lex Luthor, who's father owns a local agricultural concern. Aesthetically, expect the other WB trademarks here, with lots of teen angst, character development and tons of "hit" pop music infused throughout (the theme tune is reported to be "Kryptonite" by band Three Doors Down).

One thing we won't see, however, is the familiar red, blue and yellow long-johns, or the iconic "S" symbol any time soon: Much like the post-crisis/ John Byrne continuity, Clark doesn't become Superman until he leaves Smallville. Airs Wednesdays.

Last season's finale of **CHARMED** paved the way for the exit of Shannon Doherty, a.k.a. Prue Halliwell from the show. Without a third sister, however, the other two find themselves powerless. Enter long lost new sister, Paige, played by ex-Marilyn Manson gal-pal Rose McGowan. **CHARMED** airs Thursday nights at 9/8c.

Matt Sommer

"WORLD OF HEROS"

ALL THE NEWS THAT'S FIT TO SPOOF

ALSO IN THE NEWS

CrossGen Utilises Innovative New Marketing Strategy

IN A market where gimmicks such as **variant** covers and guest appearances are used to sell launch issues, Crossgen have turned **heads** with the original strategy they **are** using to launch their latest title, Sojourn. Sojourn tells the tale of a young girl who is **the only** one who can stop a dread overlord, but only if she can first overcome "the **tragedy** threatening to destroy her before the quest even begins." Such a title might **normally** disappear in the morass that is the comics industry, but Crossgen have grabbed the media's attention by **refusing** to admit that the title is a spoof and marketing it as a **serious** fantasy title!

We spoke to Trent Hawson, an advertising specialist who has spent years **analysing** the comics industry. He said "Crossgen's strategy is a masterstroke. Something **this derivative** just has to be a fantasy spoof, but not once in all of their marketing **literature** do Crossgen mention this. All of the old cliches are there, but Crossgen, **by** launching this comic as a **serious** title, have hit upon a little-used **marketing** weapon, and **I think** they should be applauded for bringing such innovation to this usually staid industry. The only other possibility is that this really is a serious title, but there's no way that can be true – not even **Crossgen could** launch something so **spectacularly** cliched and **expect** people to take it seriously."

We spoke to series-creator Ron Marz, who said: "It's not a **spoof**! Really! I promise you! No, I'm not joking! For **God**'s sake, this is a serious comic!" What a kidder, **eh** folks**?**!

THE TOP STORY

Marvel Attempts To Rejuvenate Market By Appealing To Lowest Common Denominator

MARVEL Comics today **announced** its new **plan** to rejuvenate the ailing comics market. They will attempt **to** revitalise the **market** by launching a new range of titles designed to appeal strictly to **young teenage boys**.

The line, masterminded by Marvel's Chief Of Secret Police **Bill Jemas**, has become **known as** the "Big Norks For **Hormonally-Imbalanced** Geeks" line. It will feature some already-existing super heroines, **as** well as **completely** new titles. We talked to artist Rob **Barney**, penciller on new team series The Masterbationaries. He told us "*I studied anatomy for many years. **What** a waste of time that **was**! **Recently** I've been **responsible for** more monstrously-**oversized breasts** than a Hollywood plastic surgeon. I **had** a page of art rejected because in one panel I drew a character without **nipples** so erect you could hang your coat **on** them. I also forgot to give one of **the characters** a **head**, but no-one noticed that.*"

We spoke to **Jemas**, who told us that the comics would be printed entirely on glossy card, **apparently** to "facilitate **one-handed** reading." We **asked** him **if** he really thought **he could** successfully **launch** a family of titles whose only selling point is **more** legs and **breasts** than a branch of KFC. He replied "Hey, it worked for Image, didn't it?"

We asked Avi Arad, Marvel's **Head** Of Public Relations, the same question. He screamed "Die, comic reading **fanboy geek**!" before security guards finally **managed to** sedate him enough to **get him back** into his **straitjacket**.

DC Faces Major Whiplash Lawsuit

DC **found** itself in legal trouble recently, as **a** string of **whiplash** injuries **in** the **US** led to a major personal **injury lawsuit** being launched against them. **The** incident occurred when thousands of **fans** simultaneously **noticed that** Kevin **Smith had** managed to get three consecutive issues of Green Arrow scripted in as many months.

A spokesperson for Killjoy And **Bastard**, the law firm spearheading the claim against DC, said "There are thousands of cases where **fans**, innocently walking past the comic shelves, did **rapid** double-takes caused by their **shock** at seeing this title. It **must have been horrible**. You could hear necks snapping **all over** the country." Claims that the situation was made worse by the recent unexpected appearances of **Danger Girl** 7 and Planetary 14 have so far gone unanswered by DC.

When **Smith** spoke to us about the incident, he **seemed** surprised. "I can't understand why this has happened," he said. "All I've written so far in my comics career is the Jay and **Silent** Bob miniseries **and** twelve issues of **Daredevil**. Anyone would think that I **had** a **reputation for** turning in late scripts."

Smith, who made his name scripting and directing motion pictures, has drawn on influences from comic writers both classic and **contemporary**. When asked which **ones**, he said "Alan Moore and J. Scott Campbell."

Chris Spicer & Rebecca Bonser

HOLD THE BACK PAGE

YOUR COMMENTS AND LETTERS

Paul Stiles
Uxbridge, Middlesex, UX4

INTRIGUING idea and I liked the design – very much the Sunday supplements approach, I like it. I've got some questions though.

I like to use my Hotmail account for stuff like this, but it has a one megabyte limit on email, what can I do? And what do you mean by different versions?

Despite being an electronic format, you're still dogged by deadlines, presumably, how are you going to beat the net to news exclusives? And, I suppose, most importantly, how are you going to finance it?

Otherwise, I thought it was an outstanding effort – I got the latest CI the day after you sent me the dummy and I have to say the only thing it has got on your effort is a better news section.

*Thanks, Paul. My intention was to do something different, that doesn't ignore everything else that's going on in the industry, and try and make the magazine more visual, but not garish and have a certain amount of meat on the bones. When I redesigned **CI** about a year ago, I was always limited by the very Eighties methods the magazine employs, in terms of design. In the end, I think we reached a sort of Nineties compromise. **Borderline**'s template is indeed the Sunday supplements and as we grow and spread our wings, we intend to be as diverse.*

*As for getting a **BL** subscription via a Hotmail account... well, we are currently working on a number of plans: we can zip the file up, possibly splitting the file into smaller self-extracting .exe files... But there is the website http://borderline.mediahall.co.uk, where you can download straight onto your hard drive, plus any of our affiliates with download portals. But the bottom line is for the cost of postage, we can send **BL** out on a floppy or a CD!*

*News isn't something we're too concerned about. Our friends at all the news sites are doing a fine job, we're just hoovering up after them and putting our unique **BL** spin on things!*

And financing... didn't you hear, we're all doing this for free! Phil Hall

Ed "iLYA" Hillier
London, EC2A

GOOD luck with this **Borderline** venture. For Heaven's sake try and keep it less world weary and depressive than **CI**, and less in-fighty and depressing than **Comics Journal**. The world doesn't need another **Wizard**, but at least they remember comics are (*meant to be*) fun. Pronounce the corpse dead often enough and the world will believe you – Heaven knows what message **CI** sends to the world at large.

Bottom line – there are more good comics to read out there than ever before, and never forget it. This seems to surprise every moaning fan I say it to – we really need a mag to shine a light in the right direction and make it patently clear where to get ahold of the right stuff and where in the shitpile the gems are lurking. I hope this is at least high in your list of aims if not top priority.

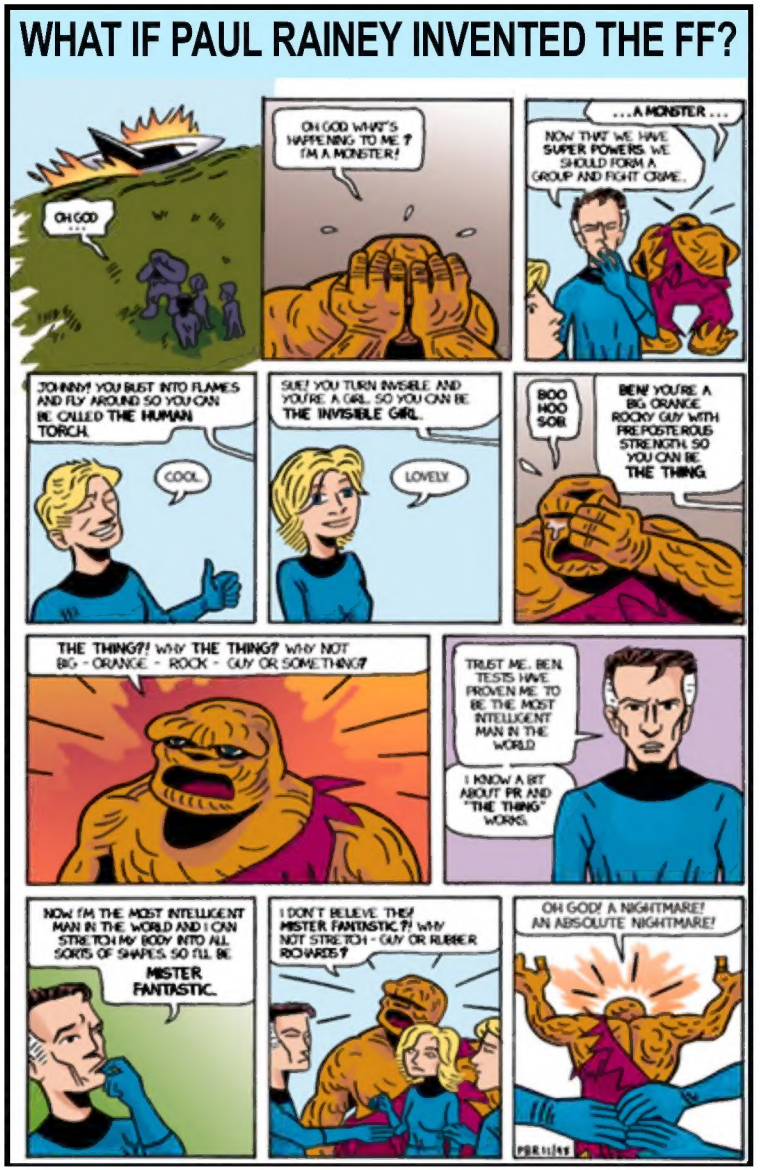
*And if ever there was a mission statement for what **Borderline** is, Ed has just summed it up!* Phil

Mike Collins
Cardiff, Wales

A FINE, handsome package... and a quantum leap over the dummy you sent me a while back (which was no poor show in itself!) Well laid out, an eye-pleasing design sense... by God man – you've got something here!

Thanks to Sarah for referring to me as one of the 'great British artists'... makes my day after a lousy weekend. And kudos for dedicating it to Lily. A noble touch.

All the best – and let me know if you want me to do anything for you!


WHAT IF PAUL RAINEY INVENTED THE FF?
OH GOD
OH GOD WHAT'S HAPPENING TO ME? I'M A MONSTER!
...A MONSTER...
NOW THAT WE HAVE SUPER POWERS WE SHOULD FORM A GROUP AND FIGHT CRIME.
JOHNNY! YOU BURST INTO FLAMES AND FLY AROUND SO YOU CAN BE CALLED THE HUMAN TORCH.
COOL
SUE! YOU TURN INVISIBLE AND YOU'RE A GIRL, SO YOU CAN BE THE INVISIBLE GIRL.
LOVELY
BOO HOO SOB
BEN! YOU'RE A BIG ORANGE ROCKY GUY WITH PREPOSTEROUS STRENGTH, SO YOU CAN BE THE THING.
THE THING?! WHY THE THING? WHY NOT BIG-ORANGE-ROCK-GUY OR SOMETHING?
TRUST ME, BEN. TESTS HAVE PROVEN ME TO BE THE MOST INTELLIGENT MAN IN THE WORLD
I KNOW A BIT ABOUT PR AND "THE THING" WORKS.
NOW I'M THE MOST INTELLIGENT MAN IN THE WORLD AND I CAN STRETCH MY BODY INTO ALL SORTS OF SHAPES, SO I'LL BE MISTER FANTASTIC.
I DON'T BELIEVE THIS! MISTER FANTASTIC?! WHY NOT STRETCH-GUY OR RUBBER RICHARDS?
OH GOD! A NIGHTMARE! AN ABSOLUTE NIGHTMARE!

BORDERLINE
THE COMICS MAGAZINE

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